



*As it appeared in Route 422 Business Advisor
February 2005*

The Phoenixville's Renaissance

By Bert Wylen

Homebuyers camped out in the overnight chill of early March last year to be first in line to buy townhomes starting at \$169,900 in a new development in Phoenixville. Seventy units sold in one weekend, driving the price to 200 thousand dollars each within that opening weekend-without a sample to show.

Wait a minute! you say. Did you say Phoenixville? That crumbling town sitting like a rust stain on the banks of the French Creek? That Phoenixville?

If that was your reaction, you're not alone. Even John MacPhee, one of the leading developers of the Phoenixville Renaissance, says, "When I began the planning process, if I had said to anyone we'd have people camped out to pay two hundred thousand dollars for a townhouse in Phoenixville, everyone would have thought I'd lost my mind completely."

Jane Tucker would agree. Tucker has lived in Phoenixville for over 15 years. "I was afraid to come downtown in the late 80s and early 90s, because there were so many drug addicts on the street. There were no viable businesses here." Today, Tucker takes that walk through a burgeoning downtown district just about every day to reach her business, Steel City Coffee House, one of many thriving businesses along Bridge Street, the main thoroughfare.

The rebirth of this once flourishing steel town began in the 1980s, with the creation of the Phoenixville Historic District. That resulted in the demolition of the old Grant's five-and-dime store at the corner of Gay and Bridge streets, with a parking lot taking its place. But blowing trash and human detritus gave no other reason for drivers to stop-nervously--for anything but red traffic signals in downtown Phoenixville.

The reincarnation of Phoenixville began in earnest in 1992, when Barbara Cohen became Executive Director of the Phoenixville Area Chamber of Commerce. Cohen, now in her sixties, is a hybrid mix of politician, artist, businesswoman and, not surprisingly given her effusive energy, a race car driver. Her two runs for seats in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, both of which she lost, resulted in her devotion to putting Phoenixville back on the map.



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"The people of Schuylkill Township and Phoenixville and East Pikeland Township voted for me overwhelmingly in 1990 as a Democrat, and then again in 1992 as a Republican," says Cohen. "I know it sounds nave, but I felt I owed something to the voters. So in summer of '92 I saw the job as director of the chamber as an opportunity to put into practice the ideas I had promulgated as a candidate." Cohen retired in December, but continues as the volunteer executive director of the Phoenixville Area Economic Development Corporation.

Cohen shepherded two projects to completion that probably more than anything else created the sea-change of thinking about the future of Phoenixville: The restoration of the former Phoenixville Steel foundry building, and the creation of Renaissance Park.

One of her first initiatives was to clean up the vacant lot at the corner of Bridge and Main streets. Once strewn with trash and weeds and illegally parked cars, through Cohen's efforts it metamorphosed into a "vest pocket park," including a huge mural painted on the wall of the building next door. Cohen wrote the grant proposal--her first of many--to get money from the National Endowment of the Arts for the project. She became adept at finding financial support for her vision for Phoenixville.

Calling it her "third child," Cohen gathered both private and public financial support for the restoration of the foundry. "It's a fabulous 1882 Richardson Romanesque building, which has achieved iconic status as Phoenixville's 'Independence Hall,'" Cohen says. "It's a focal point of the historic downtown."

The exterior renovations of the foundry have been completed. Recently, in a huge boost for the remaking of Phoenixville, the owners of Kildare's Pub and of The Point in Bryn Mawr agreed to recreate the 13,000 square feet of unobstructed interior space. The combined usage should create great synergy, with a 300-seat theater next to a 300 seat restaurant.

Of course, change of this magnitude wouldn't matter much with a 130-plus acre brownfield site in the center of town crippling growth, left behind in the bankruptcy of Phoenixville Steel. That's 130 acres of environmental scars, 130-acres of lost rateables unable support economic growth.



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Enter the Delta Organization, managing partner of Phoenix Property Group (PPG), in 2001, with a master plan for what they call French Creek Center. Through a public/private partnership with the Borough of Phoenixville for redevelopment and investment, an estimated 250 million dollars-30 million dollars of which has been tax money--will be spent to remake a brownfield site into a complete live, work and play environment for smart growth. The plan combines residential, retail, office, recreation and open space in the heart of the downtown.

"French Creek Center is going to have a core commercial piece," says John MacPhee, Project Manager for the Delta Organization. "It's going to reestablish a strong tax base, as well as provide offices for companies and jobs. It will also include residential components, some of which have already been built."

The residential piece includes senior housing, with two buildings already completed, and a third in the planning stages. Add to that the French Creek Townhomes development already mentioned, at Vanderslice and High streets, which has finally opened their first sample in February, after selling over half of the available homes without one. The Gateway, a four-story office building at the corner of Starr and Bridge streets now under construction, will be the new home of the Delta Organization.

While improvements are being made to existing infrastructure such as sewer and lighting, the biggest piece will be a new connector between routes 29 and 23, called French Creek Parkway. "That will really enable the full development of the commercial portion of the property," says MacPhee. Plans also call for a new recreational trail system which will connect to the Schuylkill Heritage Trail, providing a continuous trail network from Phoenixville east to Penn's Landing in Philadelphia and west into Berks County.

Some of that infrastructure improvement and development has been supported by both state and federal funding, garnered in large part by now-U.S. Representative Jim Gerlach, who also supported Phoenixville's vision while serving in the Pennsylvania state legislature. He says other stagnant towns should take their cues from Phoenixville's achievements in winning tax dollar support.

"Phoenixville is an excellent example of the necessity for older communities if they're going to revitalize," says Gerlach. "The locals need to come up with a common vision, and the consensus for that vision in both the public and private sectors, to give us a strong sign, at the federal level, that that's what we ought to be working on."



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In creating the Master Plan, lessons were taken from the experiences of both Manayunk and Conshohocken. "Conshohocken is a destination because of the intersection of two major highways, but there's no real sense of place there," MacPhee explains. "Manayunk has a great sense of place relative to the retail district, but that retail is disconnected from other business and from the residents to a large extent." So the planners set about to create in Phoenixville an environment that would combine living, working, and playing, all in the same neighborhood. "We've maintained all along that [development] has to be done in concert with the revitalization of the existing downtown and the community surrounding the site."

Today, Phoenixville has a significant existing downtown. Along with antique shops, florists, art dealers and other stores selling various and sundry chachkes, a number of fine restaurants have sprung up to feed customers coming to town hungry for films at the restored Colonial Theater-famous movie set for *The Blob*-and for live music at Steel City Coffee House, whose artists have included Jeffrey Gaines and Robert Hazzard along with up-and-comers, all who often pack the house.

"We're planning on making entertainment be the cornerstone of what this town is known for," says Barry Cassidy, brought in a year ago as manager of Phoenixville's Main Street Development Corporation. Cassidy has been instrumental in creating successes in downtown Downingtown, as well as Philadelphia's South Street.

"We're about to initiate a program where we will augment the current First Friday, starting in June, to have free space for artists as well as entertainment on the street, every Friday night," says Cassidy. "That will be a standard experience that you will encounter if you decide to come to Phoenixville on a Friday night." Cassidy would also like to see local merchants make Phoenixville a regional destination for Mardi Gras."

As Phoenixville rises anew from the long-burned-out blast furnaces of a long-defunct steel industry, Manny DeMutis stands out as a lifetime Phoenixville resident who never gave up on his hometown. The DeMutis Group, of which he is president, is a commercial and residential real estate developer, with a construction management team. His group took a burned down lumber yard on the edge of downtown and turned it into the new District Justice Center, with a total of 44,000 square feet, 13,000 square feet of being offered as A-rated commercial space. The borough is now exploring building a new municipal services complex nearby.



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Once a standout on Phoenixville High School's football squad and, after college, a football coach at his alma mater, the indefatigable DeMutis seems to pop up just about everywhere these days, and is one of Phoenixville's biggest cheerleaders. His most recent coup was inking a deal to bring Iron Hill Brewery to town. DeMutis will build a 7,100 square foot mixed use facility from the ground up to resemble a 19th Century row home, which will also house a Panini's Restaurant & Bakery. Iron Hill Brewery alone will bring 80 to 100 new jobs to Phoenixville.

The live, work and play formula appeals to DeMutis' own sense that a good residential mix provides the customers and workforce to support a thriving downtown. "The 'play' part is coming fast and furious," says DeMutis. "We're very picky about the types of uses that we know will work on Bridge Street, so we really filter them out. We're looking for a very upscale, eclectic kind of specialty store."

But what separates us from all the corporate parks and all the strip malls is that we have great housing stock," says DeMutis. "Within six blocks of Bridge Street, we have housing in any price range from \$150,000 to \$800,000. We have great schools, we have libraries. We have six new restaurants that aren't here yet. We've created 900 jobs that aren't here yet, and this is just in its infancy. This is just the beginning."