

Officials: Coatesville on rebound; this time we mean it

By Michaelle Bond, Staff Writer
Updated: March 19, 2016



CITY OF COATESVILLE/PENNONI ASSOCIATES
Renderings of the new Amtrak Coatesville train station project.

For decades, residents of the poorest municipality in Pennsylvania's wealthiest county have heard that their erstwhile steel city was on the verge of revitalization.

Coatesville has been struggling to recapture its glory days since its primary employer, Lukens Steel, downsized with the decline of the industry nationwide in the 1970s and '80s. The recent economic downturn has not helped.

Impressive architectural renderings have not advanced far beyond drawing boards.

But this time, officials say revitalization is for real for the city of about 13,000 residents, who celebrated Coatesville's 100th birthday last year and are hoping to replicate the success of such older urban centers as Phoenixville, West Chester, and Doylestown.

"We've never been this far before," said Linda Lavender-Norris, the City Council president.

Community and business leaders in Coatesville have formed the 2nd Century Alliance initiative to jump-start the revival.

Chester County officials and Coatesville Area Partners for Progress, the group leading the new revitalization effort, have hired an economic development administrator to attract businesses. Sonia Huntzinger, a veteran of revitalization efforts in York, Pa., starts work Monday.

The organization has raised about \$100,000 from local sponsors and is in line for a \$100,000 grant from the Wells Fargo Regional Foundation.

Construction is to begin this year on a new Amtrak station on the Keystone Corridor, a project that includes streetscape improvements. The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation has pledged \$20 million toward the project, viewed as a centerpiece of the revival.

Residents, local business owners, and city, county, state, and federal officials are buying into the resurgence, Lavender-Norris said.

But not necessarily everyone. Some Coatesville residents naturally are "leery and weary" of yet another initiative, said Regina Horton Lewis, chair of Coatesville Area Partners for Progress.

Lewis, however, said she has faith, that this is Coatesville's time. "We feel a sense of urgency about our situation," she said.

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Chester County residents identified Coatesville as one of the county's greatest challenges - and also one of its greatest opportunities - in a community questionnaire assembled for the county's 10-year economic plan.

The city's median income last year was \$35,425, according to the Nielsen service, compared with \$87,425 for Chester County. Median home values were about half the county's.

"There's been so much talk about revitalizing Coatesville," said Michelle Kichline, a county commissioner. Since 2002, the county has dedicated more than \$5 million to the city's redevelopment. "We want to make the city even better than it was in the past," she said.

County and city officials are counting heavily on Huntzinger, who spent 6 1/2 years leading an effort to make downtown York attractive to developers.

"It's very rewarding work," said Huntzinger, chosen from among more than 20 applicants.

She said she would measure Coatesville's progress in every ribbon-cutting and in every job created. In her experience, the process could take five to 10 years, she said, given government red tape and the often ponderous ways of the real estate world.

Huntzinger said she will move to Coatesville within the next six months.

Gary Sonke, former president of the board in charge of sprucing up York, said Huntzinger brought spirit to a moribund downtown.

"Nothing had happened before she got here," he said. "And it's a completely different place now, a better place."

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