

Leaders Demand More Help for Suburbs

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POTTSTOWN — No more asking for help.

It's time to start making demands.

People in the towns that built Pennsylvania, that built America, are no longer pleading with their government representatives for help, they are demanding their share as fully one-fifth of the nation's population.

And more than just stamping their feet and demanding their share, these towns are joining together.

They are using the power of democracy to put on the spot, in the spotlight, on the front line, whatever you want to call it, those representatives which democracy put in place and demanding accountability for the promises they make while caught in that spotlight.

That was the case Thursday night, when the Southeast Pennsylvania chapter of an advocacy organization called First Suburbs brought their spotlight to the community room of Montgomery County Community College's West Campus in Pottstown.

"We're here to demand that our communities become a priority," said the Rev. Ed Crenshaw of Norristown's Victory Christian Fellowship.

"We are here to amplify the voices of our neighbors," said Jacquelynn Puriefoy-Brinkley, a member of the borough council in Yeadon, Delaware County.

That voice will be further amplified on July 16, when First Suburbs hosts a statewide summit on these issues in Lancaster called "Building One Pennsylvania."

Headed up locally by Dave Forrest — now known as Norristown's municipal manager but best known to Pottstown as its now-former assistant borough manager — First Suburbs includes representatives from Montgomery, Chester, Bucks and Delaware counties.

Together, these are the wealthiest counties in Pennsylvania and, when added to the population of Philadelphia, have been known to decide more than few statewide election contests.

Just ask Ed Rendell.

But despite that apparent electoral influence, when taken together, the political influence of the communities that surround Philadelphia, the region's First Suburbs if you will, is fractured.

The same counties which host such First Suburbs such as Pottstown, Norristown, Lansdowne and Coatesville, are also home to places like Upper Merion and Chadds Ford.

And the interests of those communities do not often converge in Harrisburg, or in Washington, D.C.

How Did We Get here?

If you're wondering what a "First Suburb" is, they are the towns that sprang up near to the roads and rivers that brought goods, news and people in and out of the nation's first cities.

Or, as the Crenshaw described them, "they were the towns that were the first to be built, with diverse, livable neighborhoods, good schools and trains that ran through them carrying people to jobs and goods to market. They were the model for sustainable communities," he told the crowd Thursday.

But those towns which have dotted and characterized the Pennsylvania landscape for decades, home to the factories, the mills and the bustling downtowns, are now struggling with the challenges that come with age.

To meet those challenges, they are now banding together under the First Suburbs banner rather than try to fight those battles alone.

Some of the challenges are easy to understand and almost as easy to see with the naked eye.

They are the physical things.

Sewer pipes buried beneath High Street in 1903 cannot be expected to be robust in 2010.

Bridges first built in 1889 need maintenance.

But some of it is a little more complicated.

As industry and businesses left these towns, either for lower wage Mexican workers or for corporate office parks off the interstate, the once proud homes on High Street and Hanover Street where the owners and managers of those plants once lived became a liability — better bought by an investor and cut up into income-producing apartments than as a home for a financially stable family.

And the smaller homes where those plant workers once lived were no longer middle class homes.

No working class neighborhood thrives without work.

As the middle class packed up their cars and left for towns built to accommodate cars, train service dwindled and died and the houses left behind were certainly not worthless, but definitely worth less.

That meant they generated less revenue when they were taxed.

The people who moved into the apartments those homes became brought children to the schools, but the buildings which once housed one family, now housed two or three, but still generated the same amount of tax revenue.

The school districts in these established towns, which levy the majority of those property taxes, faced the twin challenges of ever-dwindling property values and children statistically less likely to be sent to their first day of school on a firm foundation, and thus more expensive to educate.

The district is held accountable for the performance of those children and so began to implement programs to help them catch up, to make up for what they might not be getting at home.

Those programs cost money, but the money was driving out of town in a shiny new car, headed to a lush green subdivision in a former farm field.

And so it should be of little surprise that the three things on which the First Suburbs have decided to focus are infrastructure, a fair sharing of housing diversity and a state educational funding policy that recognizes that not all school districts are created equal.

"These problems are bigger than any of our communities can solve alone," said North Coventry Supervisors' Chairman Andy Paravis.

Return on Investment

First Suburbs argues that county, state and federal policies that steer money away from established towns, particularly in the areas of infrastructure, essentially throw away the millions upon millions of dollars spent on the initial investment to install that infrastructure.

"We live greener lifestyles, we are the sustainable communities and we've been here all along," said William Caldwell, president of Norristown Municipal Council.

Not ensuring that established communities get the public dollars they need to repair and replace aging infrastructure "furthers suburban sprawl and the abandonment of our towns, driving away reinvestment and creating deep pockets of poverty in favor of places that zone out the poor," he said.

This in turn reduces property values, thus reducing tax revenues and undermining the fiscal foundation of quality schools, said Caldwell.

All of which puts pressure on the same taxpayers, said Forrest.

"Whether you're doing a borough budget or a school budget, you're in the same bind," he said. "The taxes are too high and you know if you raise them, you will drive people and businesses out. But if you don't want to raise them, you have to sacrifice programs and services and the same thing happens."

"Pottstown has the lowest market value, the lowest personal income, and the highest millage in Montgomery County," observed Reed Lindley, who takes the helm as Pottstown Schools Superintendent next month.

He said a revision in state rules which have allowed rural school districts to go years without a tax hike are needed to help "low-income, high taxed districts."

"This community is willing to do its part, however with a shrinking tax base, it is wrong to overburden the local taxpayer, when the state can revise its funding formula to address communities with high need, and then hold administration, staff, and community partners accountable to continue to improve the achievement levels of students; we welcome that, hold us accountable," Lindley said.

"In communities with a shrinking tax base, it is the state's constitutional responsibility to provide the leadership for equitable funding. We are simply asking for support of a funding formula that recognizes the educational needs of the population and the ability of the local community to pay."

Feet Firmly in the Fire

What was perhaps most unique about Thursday's forum was the manner in which elected officials, and those who wish to become elected officials, were handled.

They were set off to the side of the dias, and, as each speaker concluded outlining one of the three main areas on which First Suburbs is focused, Forrest would take the microphone, and bid specific officials who affect the policy of that area to rise.

Then in front of more than 300 witnesses, he would bind them to a pledge to support legislation and measures that First Suburbs has identified as helping to solve that problem.

But the pledge was not enough.

"It is our intention to hold those who said yes to us accountable for what they've said," said Puriefoy-Brinkley. "We can no longer be left behind. You have to be advocates for us."

And Marlon Milner, a Norristown councilman, is already holding people accountable.

He wanted to know, for example, why Montgomery County Commissioners' Chairman Jim Matthews had pledged to come, but was not there Thursday.

"Where is Jim? He made a commitment to be here. When he's committed to something, he has to show up. And for that matter, where is Bruce?" he asked, noting that unlike Matthews and Bruce Castor, Montgomery County Commissioner Joe Hoeffel was the only commissioner in attendance.

"Where is the regional office of (Housing and Urban Development)?" asked Milner. "They made a commitment to be here and they are not here."

"Their actions," Milner thundered into the microphone, "speak louder than words."

The officials who had agreed to support First Suburb's actions, had made more than a promise, Milner said. They had issued "a promissory note," he said.

"You will not be judged by your words, you will be judged by your appropriations in Harrisburg. Show us the money," Milner said.

Tomorrow, we look at Pottstown's efforts to get control of its runaway rentals.