

Reaching the Summit to avoid hitting the bottom

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By Jeff Hawkes, staff writer
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Why is it that, financially speaking, Lancaster city is on the ropes?

Well, that's easy to answer. The city's stagnant tax base can't keep up with the costly demand for police and other services.

No, wait. It's because absentee landlords turned single-family homes into multiunit apartments that fell into disrepair and ran down neighborhoods.

Hold on. Maybe it's because the rising tide of poverty has overwhelmed schools with social problems that impede education, increase costs and burden property taxpayers.

But there's also the lure of the suburbs to middle-class families wanting a rancher with a two-car garage and to shoppers wanting free parking and weather-free shopping.

Statewide issue

OK, you get the idea. Lancaster is teetering for a host of reasons.

And Lancaster is not alone. Many other urban centers, including boroughs and first-ring townships across Pennsylvania, have been sucked into a downward spiral of decline,

leading to financial distress, leading to steeper decline.

The situation is the same in Easton, Johnstown, Erie. You name the town, the problems vary only in degree.

The issue has nothing to do with whether Republicans or Democrats are in charge and everything to do with long-standing, deep-rooted state and federal policies that favor new roads and development outside cities and towns and discourage annexation and regional approaches that give older communities a fighting chance.

With cities and towns in every corner of Pennsylvania hurting because of policies beyond their control, they and their advocates are seeing the need to come together and explore a common agenda of solutions.

The process of finding common ground will start Friday, July 16, when more than 500 community leaders from across the state are expected to attend an all-day summit at Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology. They're calling it Building One Pennsylvania: A Statewide Summit on Regional Opportunity.

Regional opportunity? It's the idea that Pennsylvania, with 2,562 cities, boroughs and townships, is too fragmented for its own good.

Future success means finding ways for all parts of a region to benefit from economic

development and to share in the legacy costs of aging infrastructure, brownfields and segregation.

Unity sought

The conveners of the summit include 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, Southeastern Pennsylvania First Suburbs Project and YorkCounts — organizations that focus on rational land-use policies and effective municipal governance.

But the scope of regional equity also encompasses the missions of organizations such as Pennsylvania Council of Churches and Good Schools Pennsylvania, both of which are also conveners of the summit.

"How Pennsylvania funded education has not only failed students but contributed to the blighting of communities and sprawl," said Good Schools' Janis Risch in explaining her organization's interest in the summit.

If the summit is successful, said Marilyn Wood of 10,000 Friends, then advocates of various causes — public education, affordable housing, transit, the environment — will see how they all win if they join forces to reverse the decline of urban Pennsylvania.

The advantage of a united push is it may lead to the broad, statewide consensus that's needed to move legislation in Harrisburg, Wood said.

The hope of summit conveners, Wood said, is that enough people will see the sense in advancing a common agenda and that Pennsylvania will act to save its failing towns.

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