

An extreme makeover for the Conshohockens

Overcoming the Odds

Conshohockens pull off amazing revival, but at a price

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Jerry Nugent never knew how hilarious community redevelopment could be until he headlined the George Clay Fire Company's annual dinner in 1986.

He had no one-liners, no skits or bits. Just a slide show of ugly images from West Conshohocken, the sad Schuylkill town that his audience called home.

Spanning the screen was an artist's rendering of four white office towers jutting into a cerulean sky. There was an elegant red-brick hotel, too, and verdant parks laced with waterside walking trails. This, Nugent declared to the 150 guests, was the West Conshohocken that *could* be.

All in the firehouse banquet hall stared in silence at the renewal expert's view of their future - and burst out laughing.

In a borough where public sewers were still a pipe dream, where the lone traffic light had been turned off to save a few bucks on the electric bill, where "development" meant a new shed, somebody yelled: "Where the hell do you think you are, buddy? This is West Conshy!"

The vision that Nugent put forward wasn't quite on the money. Today there are 18 office buildings and two hotels, composing a corporate mini-city that has overspread 120 acres on the facing waterfronts of West Conshohocken and its across-the-river sister, Conshohocken. About 2.6 million square feet of office space (think 45 football fields) and still growing.

A \$900 million investment of public and private funds has produced more, though, than a new business address. The glass-and-granite complexes are the stanchions of the most dramatic old-town renaissance ever in the Philadelphia region, where dozens of beaten-down boroughs are struggling to get up from the mat. They needn't look far to see that - given copious amounts of money, foresight, guts and luck - comebacks happen.

Nationally, resurrections such as the Conshohockens', while still rare, have energized the burgeoning town-revival movement. Its disciples are urging policymakers from the White House to the statehouse to assure that turnarounds surpass sprawl as the development story of the new century.

Old communities are "pivot points," said William Hudnut, senior policy fellow at the Urban Land Institute, a research and advisory group in Washington. Just as trouble oozes from the distressed, he said, those full of "life and business are a bulwark against decay" in the region.

Signs of both life and business pervade the two square miles that are "the Conshys."

On bluffs above the commercial canyon, new million-dollar mansions for moguls sit shoulder to shoulder, blessed with spectacular views of the river and some of the lowest property-tax rates in the state. In downtown Conshohocken, on formerly humble Elm Street, property values, on average, have gone up 12-fold, with staggering exceptions: One vacant lot on West Elm that sold for \$15,000 in 1971 fetched \$630,000 a few years ago.

Where once there were shot-and-beer joints, upscale restaurants serve \$27 entrees (Linguine Monsignor, anyone?) on white linen tablecloths. And step aside for the power walkers on Fayette Street, the achingly inclined main drag.

But if the transformation reads like a Cinderella story, the fact is that the glass slipper isn't an entirely comfortable fit.

During an average weekday rush, 5,100 vehicles pass through a single intersection at Matsonford Bridge, which links the towns and leads to a nexus of major highways. The crush has created one of the region's most cursed traffic jams, ratcheting up the need not only for extensive road reconstruction but also for another bridge, costing tens of millions of tax dollars.

Along the clogged streets, an empty parking space is myth. And in the pubs and delis with storefront views of it all, the talk turns less to what the towns have gained than what they stand to lose if the development continues.

And it *will* continue - even though in the somnolent economy, rental space barely is moving in the two newest office buildings.

One developer wants to add four 25-story condominium towers, taller by nearly 80 feet than any other structure in the corporate neighborhood. They would house 2,300 residents, probably an un-Conshy-like mix of Generation X'ers and Y'ers and moneyed empty nesters, and at capacity cause Conshohocken's population of 7,600 to balloon by 30 percent.

The plan was unveiled at a public meeting in August. This time, nobody was laughing.

The redevelopment fathers "didn't envision anything like this," grouched Gerald McTamney, one of the few who is still alive.

As a Conshohocken borough councilman, he had collaborated with Jerry Nugent in reimagining his town. Now he is torn over the course he helped set. His own wife, Mary, decries the result as a "concrete jungle" suited to King Kong.

"A lot of people say, 'What the hell have you done here?' " McTamney said recently. "But I don't think we had a choice.

"We couldn't keep going the way we were."

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In the Great Society heydays, cash for community revitalization poured out of Washington in a gusher never seen before. From 1965 through 1969, \$3.6 billion in grants - almost \$20 billion in today's dollars - was approved for distressed cities and towns across the country, with Pennsylvania as one of the major beneficiaries.

"There was so much money [and] very little critical thinking" about how it would be spent, said Marcy Rogovin, a West Conshohocken resident who then was an urban-renewal field representative for the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Grant applications came in, she said, and "out went the money."

Then, as today, small-town leaders rarely had development expertise. Few knew how to put the feds' largesse to use. So county governments stepped in to guide them, usually with a phalanx of bulldozers.

Under the prevailing wisdom, renewal meant removal. Blighted areas were to be razed, not rehabbed, to clear the way for the future. The counties also suggested how that future should look in plans custom-drawn for their declining burghs.

In many communities, the plans died in the crossfire of partisan feuds among local officials over what would be built in whose ward. Montgomery County's proposal for Norristown - liberal leveling of rundown homes, new parking lots, wider roads - was one that went nowhere. It was doomed partly by such squabbles, but also by what was read around town as the put-down tone of the county plan, which referred to Norristown as a "garish jungle."

One borough in Montgomery County, though, was in no position to let politics or pride get in the way of opportunity. By the '60s, few places were worse off than Conshohocken.

Both Conshys, in fact, were on a lightning slide down.

In the post-war boom, anyone could find work along the smokestack-studded waterfront in one day of job-hunting. Taverns outside the plant gates had three happy hours, one for the end of each shift. Hourly wages equal to about \$25 today meant steady business for local shops.

Then the factories, whether metal fabricating or specialty wiring, began to fail, victims in the creeping Rust Belt. During the '50s, manufacturing jobs in and around the two boroughs fell from 7,500 to 4,400.

The towns' decline was hastened by the opening of the King of Prussia mall in 1963 and the Plymouth Meeting Mall three years later, pulling customers away from the mom-and-pop stores that stood for decades like street-corner shrines.

By then, a small and deeply worried band of borough leaders in Conshohocken had turned to the county to help them save the town's riverfront end, home to dead and dying businesses and the poorest of the poor.

The county commissioned a master plan. Finished in 1964, it conjured a wild scene: a Saks Fifth Avenue, fancy restaurants, high-rise apartments, premium offices and a hotel, all served by an underground garage and surrounded by townhouses.

If the battered, blue-collar populace found the plan fantastical, so did HUD. From 1966 to 1974, the agency mulled the infeasibility of it, then handed over \$10 million to try it.

Property was purchased bit by bit. More than 600 residents and 55 businesses, including 11 taprooms, had to be relocated; the elderly were moved to a complex that HUD required the borough to build. Given the beat-up blocks where the displaced lived, resistance to leaving was minimal, said Nugent, who oversaw the renewal project as a county consultant.

"Most folks knew they were moving to a better place," he said, adding that it would not be as easy now. "It seems to me that, today, people are not likely to accept government telling them what's good for them."

In the spring of 1976, a demolition derby began that would last six years.

"This town was going to be a ghost town if we didn't make some crazy decisions," McTamney said. But "I remember saying to myself, 'What the hell do we know about this?'"

He and other borough officials managed smiles as the beloved Riant movie theater fell, and Warrel's All-Purpose Store, and the Moose Lodge. They watched stiff-lipped as a wrecking ball smashed the Nativity-themed windows of the 93-year-old Presbyterian Church.

Only one building was so sacrosanct that, when the bulldozers threatened, the town freaked. The Washington Hose and Steam Fire Engine Company No. 1, an Italianate structure of red brick, had stood near the bridge since 1878 and was said to be the nation's oldest active firehouse. Its members fought eviction in court and on the street, dangling councilmen in effigy from the station tower.

The firehouse, however, wasn't the only source of heat.

Around town, Nugent said, "the expectation had been that, as something was demolished, something new would go right up." Yet years were passing with no construction, let alone a Saks, to leaven the destruction.

Council members were hassled wherever they went. Some began attending church out of town. All avoided the local bars because "you were asking for trouble if you went. They'd say, 'We'll shoot you,' " said McTamney, who bought a gun for protection. "You couldn't take it lightly."

When the dust settled in 1982, 248 buildings were gone. On 25 acres from the riverside train tracks to the downtown's edge at First Avenue, nothing was standing, save for the victorious Washington Hose and Steam Fire Engine Company No. 1.

Otherwise, Conshohocken had its field of dreams. It also had two local builders game to put a small office complex on it, as well as some low-income housing. The 40 Section 8 units, Nugent said, would assure HUD that the poor would be provided for, and "open the doors" to a lot more federal dollars.

At this point in the process, counties often began handing off to the towns. But as Nugent saw it - and as conventional wisdom holds today - this was no time to be without a guru.

"I believed that, for the project to succeed, someone had to be on top of it daily, not a consultant with many other towns," he said. "I believed I knew what to do."

Nugent took out a \$10,000 equity line against his home, cashed in a \$20,000 insurance policy, and formed his own firm in 1982, with Conshohocken as his only client. For \$30 an hour, half the going rate for renewal experts, he set up a desk in a Borough Hall back room. Next to a large sink and a janitor's mop, he banged out grant applications on a rented typewriter and scratched for tenants for what would be the Pleasant Valley Business Center.

Right down to its mouthful of a name (Leni-Lenape Indian for "place of the long fine land"), Conshohocken was no easy sell. The population was hemorrhaging, having dropped nearly 17 percent in the 1970s alone, when two of the area's largest employers, Alan Wood Steel and Lee Tire, went under. (West Conshohocken fared even worse, losing 680 residents, or almost a third.)

"It was a slum" with the rap of "a hard-drinking, hard-living, low-class town of toughs," Nugent said. "People on the outside were frightened of that."

In October 1983, work began on one office low-rise. Nugent had even lured a tenant: an employee-benefits group looking for easy access to Philadelphia International Airport and, with a staff of 90, growing room.

At the groundbreaking, politicians waxed optimistic, the grade-school winners of the "Why I Love Conshohocken" essay contest were announced, and everyone dug in to free hot dogs and birch beer. A skywriter laboriously spelled out "Conshohocken Means Business," affirmation from above that the town had arrived.

The four-story building, of red brick to match the firehouse, opened the following year.

"People were expecting more of the same," said Vince Flocco, whose family owns Flocco's Discount Clothes & Shoes, a Fayette Street stalwart since 1926.

"I think we would have been pretty happy with that."

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Location, location, location.

It's not just a real estate mantra. For many aging communities trapped in the past, it can be the open sesame to a future.

"Downtown [Philadelphia] used to be the center of the region," said Robert Lang, a leading urban-planning researcher. "But with so much suburban growth, old towns now are at the center, the key intersections. That can be exploited."

Few, though, wind up so near the bull's-eye as the Conshys.

In 1986, the U.S. Supreme Court ended a dispute that had stalled construction of Interstate 476 for 16 years. The 21.5-mile "Blue Route" was the missing link to three main arteries: at one end, I-95; at the other, the Pennsylvania Turnpike, and in the middle, the Schuylkill Expressway at the Conshohockens.

With the Harrisburg muscle of State Sen. Richard Tilghman (R., Montgomery), Nugent got PennDot to tweak the Schuylkill Expressway interchange by adding a ramp - leading right to the redevelopment zone.

The \$750,000 tab for its design and the extra land was picked up by an out-of-towner. For Don Pulver, it would be the gateway to an empire assessed today at \$142 million.

The veteran office developer had long kept an eye on the stalled Blue Route while he added to the Center City skyline, with high-rises at 1234 and 1600 Market St. Farther up Market, he sold a tract to Willard Rouse for Liberty Place. With the \$16 million, he scooped up real estate in the Conshys.

Within six months of the Blue Route ruling, before other developers grasped its import, Pulver had purchase options on 34 riverfront acres. He brought big-city plans with him: a quartet of office towers anchoring the corners of Matsonford Bridge.

This time, though, Conshohocken wasn't popping the birch beer. Pulver intended to begin his building spree not there but in West Conshohocken, nearer the new highway ramps. He also wanted a \$5 million no-interest loan - from a town so broke that its council members had considered dissolving it into Upper Merion Township.

West Conshohocken hadn't a prayer of producing the money on its own. As now widely acknowledged, the 1980 Census had seriously undercounted the town's poverty population, making it ineligible for HUD grants.

What it did have, however, was what any town with a hope of rebirth needs: a friend in Washington. To his constituents in Montgomery County and Philadelphia, the late U.S. Rep. Lawrence Coughlin was known not only for his bow ties, but also his ties to HUD. A senior member on the Appropriations Committee, the Republican could route \$4.7 million to West Conshohocken through an eligible municipality as its sponsor.

So to save itself, Conshohocken agreed to first save its neighbor, running "the risk that a project would be developed over there," Nugent said, "and that would be the end of it."

Around West Conshy, where the white collars were worn by priests, an office colossus sounded "crazy," said Joseph Costello, then council president and one of those who laughed when Nugent unveiled Pulver's plan at the firehouse dinner.

"To put something that big here, it was just unbelievable."

Less than one mile square, with one-third of that cannibalized by the state for highway ramps, the borough had not pursued even modest revitalization. Sewage from failed septic systems occasionally flowed down the streets; its homes, mostly tired rowhouses, were 20 years older than the county average.

"It was ugly," Pulver said. "I mean *really* ugly."

It also was a geologic nightmare. Rocky hillsides made for nightmarish drilling, and caverns had to be filled with cement. The detritus of the industrial past, such as the "blue glue" oozing from one tract, had to be cleaned up.

Yet by 1989, where Gleba Bros. Lumber Yard used to be, stood One Tower Bridge. Pulver made it 15 conspicuous stories tall, he said, "to overwhelm the blight" and chose polished white granite "to change night to day," although that alone would not "overcome the negative attitudes about this place."

So Pulver lured an international brand name to an old oil dump across the street. By October 1991, the red Marriott logo was glowing atop a 17-story, 288-room hotel.

"It was tough to sit in Conshohocken and watch," Nugent said.

Pulver eventually switched sides, opening Two Tower Bridge there in 1992. As Nugent reeled in federal and state grants for low- and no-interest loans (\$30 million through the 1980s and '90s), cranes poked the sky like exclamation points.

By 1996, there were seven office buildings in the joint redevelopment zone; by 2001, six more, and in the last two years, five more - in total, the work of five developers.

That real estate now generates \$3.9 million a year in property taxes. It also has added 7,500 workers to the wage-tax rolls, helping to catapult annual collections in the Conshys from less than \$4 million to \$7.2 million in the last 15 years.

Flush with tax income and obligatory donations by developers, the towns pulled out their wish lists. Between them, they have renovated or expanded every public building; tripled their Borough Hall staffs; replaced their police, garbage and maintenance fleets; repaved streets; and purchased five fire engines.

"It's really been a blessing," said Joe Collins, Conshohocken council president. "Not so long ago we had nothing. *Nothing.*"

Nugent looks at the valley of the megaliths and wonders whether the towns really "want what they got." He thinks the answer should be yes.

"The goal was to help these two communities that were in a state of collapse to achieve some economic stability. What has happened has brought that about - and maybe then some."

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It is the "then some" that many find hard to swallow.

A feeling of progress gone kerflooey hangs like exhaust over the choked traffic at the four-lane Matsonford Bridge - "the Achilles' heel of this whole redevelopment plan," said Vince Totaro, a Conshohocken councilman and caterer.

Within a five-mile radius are 164,000 residents and 153,000 jobs. Toss in two big-box malls along Conshohocken's rim, anchored by Ikea and Lowe's Home Improvement, and "we're in the middle of where everyone's going," Collins said.

That was part of the allure for Cadient Group, an online pharmaceutical marketing company that relocated its headquarters from Center City last year. For workers commuting from as far east as New Jersey and as far west as Coatesville, Conshohocken was dead center.

Crossing the bridge, though, can add a half-hour to the trip. And the Conshys' office space is only about 75 percent filled.

"If this place ever got heavily occupied," said Bob Weissman, Cadient's president, "I can't imagine what would go on."

A backfire, experts predict.

"You're now seeing traffic congestion that could inhibit growth," said Ron Bednar, Pennsylvania Planning Association president and a community development expert for the state.

Answers are obvious. They also are costly and contentious and thus a long way off.

The towns, Bednar said, could be a "major transit-oriented development," given the regional rail line from Center City to Norristown that serves them. But the riverside stop is just a track-level stretch of concrete under the bridge, not easily accessible to the downtowns. SEPTA, a spokesman said, has no plans to make it more inviting.

Montgomery County is backing bigger, better roads, as proposed in a \$20 million plan that also would add two lanes to the bridge. The Conshys, though, are balking at being required to first sink \$3 million into an engineering study. Besides, they say, a wider bridge would just lure more "pass-through" traffic.

The most ambitious solution - another bridge in another municipality - is generating the most noise. But it is the sound of arguing, for no township wants the cars diverted its way.

Traffic is not the only glitch in the development machine powering the towns.

In West Conshohocken, buildable land has virtually been depleted, jeopardizing a municipal budget heavily dependent on continuing construction. A recent consultant's report warned that, although the borough has benefited from the office invasion, it lacks a vibrant, retail-rich town center - a heart to keep the blood flowing when the permit fees stop.

"We've got the big buildings, but no stores," said Michael Leonard, borough manager. There is "nowhere to go but Wawa."

Conshohocken has stores and open riverfront land. It also has a boiling pot of opinions on what should be put on those 50 acres, how high and how dense.

Pulver has an agreement of sale on three acres, future home of his eighth office building. Most of the land belongs to developer J. Brian O'Neill, who has proposed not only the four 25-story condo towers but also an office low-rise, shops, a plaza, an amphitheater and a mile-long park.

The August night that O'Neill took his plan public, someone in the crowd muttered, "Enough is enough!" But the reality is, McTamney said later, "we started something we can't stop."

Figuring how to reap the biggest reward from it - that, says Nugent, is the challenge ahead.

Now director of the Montgomery County Redevelopment Authority, he has another tough case, Norristown, on his plate.

But he keeps his old bailiwick in his sights. It is, after all, only a work in progress.

"It's one of the rare second acts," he said. "The question is: What's the third act?"