

Lancaster's Heritage Lost?

A path to conserving historic buildings, neighborhoods and natural resources: retain, reinvest, repair and re-use.

By Randolph Harris August 15, 2014

What happens to our community if we continue to sit back and allow the landmarks of Lancaster County's identity to be torn down, or moved to another location with little or no justification? Why do we allow these valuable, finite resources to decay and collapse, rather than help owners and developers realize the investment value of preserving historic buildings?

If the current onslaught against historic properties keeps apace, how much longer will Lancaster County maintain its brand as a vibrant, verdant place of choice for businesses, families and visitors?

Is the county in danger losing its "soul," as building after building is ignored or intentionally demolished for the next new project?

Many people do not believe we've reached that point, but that will be our fate if we don't contend with "a thousand little cuts" that eventually will add up to a hemorrhage.

Background: Two sites associated with the late, great US Congressman Thaddeus Stevens were proposed to be moved because they were "in the way" of development projects: first in 1900, his remains and nearly 10-ton monument, and the remains of others in the entire cemetery where he was buried was proposed for a residential development. The justification: the cemetery was in deplorable condition. One hundred years later, Stevens' Home and office and adjacent buildings stood in the path of the Lancaster County Convention Center.

Thankfully, neither plan resulted in these ill-conceived moves and the historic sites that remain are accepted and celebrated as part of our community's heritage. In June the Urban Land Institute awarded the Convention Center and Marriott Hotel Complex a prestigious award for the project's unique blending of historic architecture and new construction

We surely can't forget the destructive 1970s era Urban Renewal in the second block of North Queen Street. Now we see the adjoining blocks of North Queen enjoying a renaissance while the second block tries to claw its way back to some viable form.

Consider this wave of recent and pending cases that demonstrate what we are losing:

Old Philadelphia Pike – Smoketown- The mid-1800s Musser House was allowed to become a gutted shell in recent years – even before Sheetz decided that high traffic corner would be its next site for yet another of its massive gas stations and stores.

Main Street Mount Joy – a new retail store proposed for in existing building claims it requires more parking than its parcel can accommodate, hence the "need" to tear down the adjacent 1880s dwelling that clearly adds to the historic character of this classic small market town.

East Hempfield – farmstead, circa 1880, Nissly Road - to be demolished because it's "in the way" of a new housing development.

East Hempfield – A Landis Family farmstead, Fairmont project- Discussions of another building relocation because an access road to a new housing development is proposed on its site.

Belmont, Manheim Township – plans to dismantle and move this iconic 1874 Mayer Farmstead barn and outbuildings because they were unilaterally declared "in the way" of a new highway intersection -- with no challenge by the Township -- for access to yet another shopping center in a municipality that is the very epitome of automobile dependency.

Christian Herr House II West Lampeter – One of the oldest remaining dwellings in Lancaster County, representing some of the deepest roots of European settlement in America, this altered but still highly significant residence may soon be destroyed for a new home that will easily cost its owners a half million dollars.

Millersville Borough will remove a historic property from its local inventory and sanction its demolition not based on an objective evaluation that it's lost its historic integrity, but because it is "in the way" of road project promoted as a public safety measure but the actual result will be moving more traffic, faster and in a more direct path in the amid a residential neighborhood.

What alternatives do we have?

Al Duncan, Miller's Smorgasbord & Gift shop, Plain & Fancy Farm and Country Store and Amish View Inn & Suites and member of several boards of directors involved in tourism and community development: "It's not about us. It's about our kids and the people who come after us. The barn at Belmont is like a light house. It's significant not just because of how it appears and what it was used for but also where it is located. We all have a long list of buildings that we wish we could still have in our communities, but yet we keep letting these landmarks go."

Tom Lainhoff, principal, Museum Quality Building Restoration, Inc., Strasburg, with 35 years of experience in historic preservation, including service on the Historic Architectural Review Board of Strasburg Borough: "For the last 30 years the distribution of public and private resources for conservation purposes has given us 100,000-plus acres of preserved farmland in Lancaster County. But programs for preserving historic building and neighborhoods has never received anywhere near those levels. We provide huge sums of money to keep land in farming but we as a county, state or federal government don't pay anyone anything to retain and preserve their historic building."

Gary Van Dyke, Caernarvon Township Supervisor and large animal vet: He sees potential in making changes to prevailing building codes that favor new construction and make commercial-focused rehab of existing historic buildings more difficult and expensive than necessary. What can we do differently, before it's too late to conserve more than just a trace of this special landscape we have inherited?

We can hold a countywide summit of agencies, companies, institutions and people involved in the broad range issues that focus on heritage preservation and economic development, with the goal of reaching

consensus on what it will take to most effectively conserve our environment as a whole – which includes natural resources and the built environment. At such a summit we could explore public policies and private incentives that encourage retention, reinvestment, repair and re-use through:

1. Building codes that make it easier to retain and reuse existing buildings;
2. Greater tax abatements and tax credits for the appropriate rehabilitation of historic buildings, for both residential and commercial buildings;
3. Enact zoning ordinances that ensure protections for historic buildings and natural resources, as called for in each municipality by state statutes, and which are endorsed by the County's Comprehensive Plan.
4. Transferable Development Rights (TDRs) for preserving historic sites, modeled after similar initiatives that allow developers to build larger new buildings, or to build at greater density than is otherwise allowed under zoning, in exchange for cash payments to a fund that preserves farmland and natural resources such as riparian stream buffers and woodlands;
5. If TDRs are not possible or accepted in a given municipality, and developers can demonstrate no feasible alternatives in a public process, those firms should be required to compensate the community for the loss of historic and natural resources, in the same way that they are required to replace wetlands lost through development.
6. Educational workshops for individual residents and developers on cutting edge visionary ways to incorporate historic buildings into residential and commercial development plans.

We need to move toward a community ethic where every effort is made to retain environmental and historic resources where they exist – that developers' first thought would be, "How can we retain as much of this existing landscape as possible, and still achieve my goals?"

The writer is an independent consulting historian based in Lancaster who also served as executive director of Historic Preservation Trust of Lancaster County (1995-2002); a Western Pennsylvania municipal planning commission member; communications specialist, real estate appraiser and environmental reviewer for a federal agency; and a journalist at daily and weekly newspapers.