

**Response to Patricia Lowry, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, January 27, 2004**  
**Solutions for the Fifth-Forbes Corridor in Downtown Pittsburgh**

Pittsburgh's Fifth-and-Forbes corridor affords the entire Pittsburgh region a historic opportunity to avoid past mistakes and move forward on exciting new initiatives. The Young Preservationists Association embraces the message of CMU Professor Joel Tarr's new book, "Devastation and Renewal: An Environmental History of Pittsburgh and Its Region": let us not repeat mistakes of the past. In the words of CMU Professor Richard Florida, in quoting Jane Jacobs, "new ideas require old buildings."

In essence, we believe Downtown doesn't need too much tinkering. The Young Preservationists' recommendation is to build on Downtown's strengths of architectural diversity (old and new buildings), pedestrian-friendly streets, transit-accessible location, and untapped potential for housing.

Based on input from our Board, Advisory Board, and Members, the Young Preservationists Association developed its own unique "vision" for Downtown Pittsburgh. The YPA believes that creative and flexible taxation and zoning mechanisms combined with existing preservation laws, new state legislation, and time-tested preservation techniques will ultimately generate a successful mixed-use residential, office, and retail environment for the Fifth-and-Forbes corridor.

In particular, we have three specific recommendations for the Fifth-and-Forbes corridor: 1) Expand the Downtown historic districts; 2) Create a competitive "Urban Business & Residential Homesteading Program" that encourages a mix of housing, retail, and office space; and 3) Adopt meaningful transit changes to increase Downtown's accessibility without compromising its historic integrity. These recommendations are explained in detail, below.

**1. Expand the Downtown Historic Districts**

You can't have too much of a good thing. The YPA believes that Pittsburgh must maintain the historic integrity of our downtown buildings, including historic interiors. We want to keep our architectural landscape as distinct as possible so that our downtown is unlike any other urban center in the country. The current historic districts—Penn-Liberty and Market Square—are the most vibrant and economically successful parts of Downtown. We must build upon this success.

Specifically,

- A third Downtown historic district along the Fifth-and-Forbes corridor should strongly be considered to include other notable structures, such as the Park Building, Warner Theater, and other buildings.
- Nominate Fourth Avenue, between Smithfield and Wood streets that borders the Market Square District to be a historic district. As the former "Wall Street" of

Pittsburgh, Fourth Avenue should also be afforded the same preservation protections and dignity as the Market Square and Penn-Liberty Historic Districts, which have demonstrated their stability, vitality, and economic viability.

- The successful work of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust should be extended to the Fifth-and-Forbes corridor by diversifying performing arts venues with smaller theaters for live music and local productions and a multi-screen movie theater, in addition to the development of housing.
- Amend the Historic Preservation Code to create a special historic interiors provision for Downtown. The “raping” of the marble interior of Mellon Bank was a travesty that could have been avoided by the developers, financiers, and retailers if preservation of the historic interior had been codified into law.
- Allow for flexibility in development. The YPA is not flatly against demolition or alteration of historic structures; some compromises may have to be made. But these are options of last resort. We still feel that “smaller-is-better” in the Jane Jacobs sense and that as little as possible should be demolished. Progressive new architecture should be encouraged where appropriate (i.e. not to replace a historic structure). How about hiring Frank Ghery to design a unique structure?

## **2. Create a Competitive “Urban Business & Residential Homesteading Program” That Encourages a Mix of Housing, Retail, and Office Space**

Housing, housing, housing! Overwhelmingly, the YPA’s members call for the development of for-sale, rental, and affordable housing Downtown. Housing within Pittsburgh’s Central Business District will be essential to making any development succeed. The Building Code must be changed to eliminate the archaic obstacles to residential conversion of downtown buildings.

In addition, a mix of local businesses and national companies should be encouraged to locate in the corridor. This should not be limited to retail only. Tap into the knowledge economy and grow businesses that do not rely entirely on foot traffic. We want to avoid another “Lazarus” or “Lord & Taylor” fiasco.

To accomplish this, a special, mixed-use district, called an “Urban Business & Residential Homesteading Program” should be made available to developers and individuals based on recycled historic buildings reconfigured for small businesses. This would also include living space for the business owner/operator in under-utilized spaces of the property.

Specifically,

- Adjust the old Urban Renewal model by creating a competitive program that rewards innovative quality commercial design with incorporated living spaces and sound business plans with low- or no-cost land and new/upgraded infrastructure to the site.
- Developers and/or individuals could negotiate the sale of the building with the current owners; alternatively, the URA could buy the land and buildings in special cases. In

either case the agency makes the property available to the highest evaluated rehab/development/small business plans within established guidelines and rehab standards.

- Sales or donations of historic preservation easements to permanently protect the public investment; maintain the revitalized area under manageable and fairly enforced standards; and to help make the acquisition/rehab numbers work to the extent possible for the owner or developer.
- Location Efficient Lending—innovative underwriting standards by private or public lenders who recognize the significant retention of disposable income to people who are living where they work.
- Split-tax real estate assessments that also could include the establishment of a Land Trust that could be an entity that would own the land under the improved property in certain cases and which could be organized around a BID or Main Street variant.
- Urge swift passage of the proposed Historic Rehabilitation and Economic Revitalization Tax Credit Act (PA Senate Bill 820 and its companion bills House Bill 951 and 952). The House version passed unanimously in 2003. In short, this legislation provides a 20% tax credit on eligible redevelopment costs, and the tax credits can be used to offset corporate net income tax, personal income tax, utility tax, insurance tax, bank and financial institute tax, and capital stock and franchise tax. The proposed historic tax credit empowers local redevelopment authorities to designate those buildings that are most important to the community and most economically viable for consideration.

### **3. Adopt Meaningful Transit Changes to Increase Downtown's Accessibility Without Compromising its Historic Integrity**

- No more surface lots. The YPA calls for a moratorium on surface lots within the Downtown district. They are a waste of real estate. Parking garages and underground facilities like Mellon Garage should be encouraged.
- Consider creating a free (or low-fee) shuttle that would service suburban communities to bring people Downtown, perhaps from Ross Park and South Park malls, and attract people from surrounding cities, like Beaver, Greensburg, Indiana, Uniontown, Washington, and Waynesburg.
- Create common-sense ways to navigate the archaic Downtown bus routing systems.
- A commuter rail system from the north and east should be strongly considered, eliminating current strain on Route 28 and the Parkway East.

The YPA also has specific proposals, some of which are currently in development:

- A GROCERY STORE! We understand one is in the works, but the necessity of this amenity cannot be underestimated, particularly for Downtown dwellers.
- Focus on national chains that have no/little suburban competition, such as Crate and Barrel and Urban Outfitters.
- Relocate the McDonald's that greets visitors when they drive over the Fort Pitt Bridge (perhaps relocate it *under* the bridge) and use that space for an elegant & dramatic building that greets visitors and contributes to the City's skyline.

- Construct a covered arcade over one of the alleys where shoppers can mingle, weather-free, but still outdoors, with retailers, diners, street musicians, and food vendors. A pedestrian-friendly downtown also includes putting in adequate lighting and maps that direct people to cultural resources, restaurants, and shopping.
- Offices for the Young Preservationists!