

Preserve Pittsburgh Summit

Opening Remarks by Dan Holland, YPA's Chief Executive Officer

Saturday, March 28, 2009

Thank you

SLIDE 3

Hello and welcome to the Preserve Pittsburgh Summit. You are in store for a very special event today.

Thank you to our speakers, Council President Doug Shields and Councilman Bill Peduto. Thank you also to Congressman Mike Doyle for his support of this event. Congressmen Doyle and Altmire have recently joined the Congressional Historic Preservation Caucus, so we thank them for their support. I know Mr. Doyle's chief of staff, Jeff Schaffer, is here with us today.

SLIDE 4 & 5

I send a big "thank you" to our sponsors, who have made this event free and who continue to support the work of YPA. These include:

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SLIDE 6

Thank you to the YPA Board, particularly our Executive Committee—Justin Gunther, our Board Chair; Jeff Woodard, YPA's Vice Chair; Linda Gwinn, YPA's Secretary; and Sarah Rossbach, YPA's Treasurer. Please give them a hand.

I also want to thank YPA's Advisory Committee for their unyielding support of this organization.

Thank you to the Preserve Pittsburgh Host Committee, Planning Committee, and volunteers, who have given much of their time and energy to organize and promote the Preserve Pittsburgh Summit.

We all need to thank Drew Armstrong, Gretchen Bender, and the University of Pittsburgh's History of Art and Architecture Department. I also want to note the support of the Heinz History Center for helping us plan this event.

Finally, thank you for coming and participating in what we hope will be a memorable and historic day.

The State of Historic Preservation in the Pittsburgh Region

The state of historic preservation in the Pittsburgh region is a mixed bag of success stories and devastating losses.

SLIDE 7

The Main Street Program has revitalized a number of core communities throughout our region.

A number of warehouses and former industrial factories have been converted into lofts, creating more than \$300 million in new investment.

And the Pittsburgh supports an impressive network of rails-to-trails that provide numerous recreation opportunities all across our region.

SLIDE 8

Green building is hot right now, and Pittsburgh is one of the top cities in the country for green buildings. But I constantly remind people that preservation is green. We don't have to build new to be green.

These are the things that young people desire: Restored Main Streets, loft housing, hike and bike trails, and a commitment to the environment. These amenities provide reasons for young people to come to Pittsburgh and stay.

If only we had more of it.

SLIDE 9

In fact, historic preservation all across our country is under assault. In Chicago, residents have filed a lawsuit that has made it all the way to the Illinois Supreme Court challenging the city's historic landmark law. Here in Pittsburgh, elected officials have referred to historic designation as "punishment" and vote against preserving our history in the name of "property rights."

And this just occurred last year, during Pittsburgh's 250th anniversary celebration. Are we celebrating history or destroying it?

SLIDE 10

The Pittsburgh region suffers from a number of challenges, including suburban growth and development that sucks the life out of our core cities, school abandonment, and many municipalities which have no plan for the reuse of their older structures.

Along with these buildings, we have lost a lot of young people, too. Numerous market studies that young people like and want old buildings. It is what gives the Pittsburgh region its competitive advantage over other regions as we compete for talented young workers.

SLIDE 11

As we have lost population, vacant properties have proliferated. And, since most municipalities do not have a historic preservation plan, they have chosen to demolish their urban fabric rather than fix it up—while using your tax dollars to do it.

SLIDE 12

This is a recipe for disaster. It creates a downward spiral that most communities are ill-equipped to handle. From McKeesport, to Braddock, the Hill District, to Brownsville, Friendship and Downtown, we are witnessing a disappearing landscape, a disappearing identity.

SLIDE 13

On Pittsburgh's North Side, a historical marker notes the accomplishments of dancer/choreographer Martha Graham, but the house where she lived has been demolished. And the Old Allegheny Rows National Register Historic District is rapidly fading away.

SLIDE 14

African American landmarks have been hardest hit, including the loss of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Elizabeth and the Homestead Workingmen's Club in Homestead.

SLIDE 15

The Pittsburgh region is literally removing its competitive advantages by demolishing its unique old buildings.

SLIDE 16

In the 1950s, it was called "urban renewal" and people spoke out against it. In this new era, it has no name and people are too quiet.

SLIDE 17

All across our region, old buildings are coming down—unnecessarily, in many cases—funded with your tax dollars that could instead be used for stabilization and preservation.

SLIDE 18

It leads me to ask, "dude, where's my history?"

The Hope

SLIDE 19

So, how do we change this scenario? Young people!

By encouraging youth leadership and the participation of young people in preservation, we can forge a new paradigm.

SLIDE 20

YPA's programs and activities develop the next generation of preservation leadership throughout southwestern Pennsylvania—by co-sponsoring a Black History Contest; by leading Wheeling Through History bike tours; and identifying emerging talent through our Promise Award.

SLIDE 21

When the first home of the National Negro Opera Company was threatened, YPA was there. When the historical marker got knocked down in 2007, we stepped in to replace it and re-dedicate it.

When the house was condemned by the city, we organized to board it up and stabilize it.

SLIDE 22

YPA's Youth Main Street Advisors Program engages high school students to re-discover their Main Street business districts to develop a video and or book about the community's history, current condition, and future.

SLIDE 23

YPA works with elected officials to encourage pro-preservation policies and to reinforce the notion that preservation means new jobs, new businesses, and new life in old communities.

SLIDE 24

And, most importantly, preservation is an effective way to attract and keep our young people. Young people are our collective future and it is up to all of us to nurture them, support them, and help them shape a better tomorrow.

SLIDE 25

In 1987, I had my high school graduation ceremony in this building, the Syria Mosque, just a few blocks from where we are right now. This is it today, a parking lot. This is a reminder that our work is not yet finished.

SLIDE 26

As preservationists, we must remain vigilant. We must act proactively and reinforce the positive aspects of preservation. With your help, with the help of young people, we can change this region, make it better, by saving our history, giving life to our history.

Preserve Pittsburgh Summit: Collaborate to Save History

SLIDE 27

The Preserve Pittsburgh Summit provides a real-life opportunity for young people to shape the future of our neighborhoods. The inspiration for this workshop came from our annual list of the Top Ten Best Preservation Opportunities. The question kept being asked, “now that you have this list of historic properties, what next?”

Well, this is the “what next.”

Your job today is to make your voice heard. We want you to provide your input into how these four historic buildings should be saved and reused.

These include the August Wilson House in the Hill District; the New Granada Theatre in the Hill; the Garden Theater on the North Side; and the first home of the National Negro Opera Company in Homewood/Lincoln-Lemington.

All four sites are city-designated historic landmarks and all four have appeared on YPA’s Top Ten List. However, all four are abandoned and in need of repair.

SLIDE 28

Playwright August Wilson was born in 1945 in this modest rowhouse in the Hill District. It became the inspiration for many of his plays that formed the 10-part Pittsburgh Series that earned him numerous awards and accolades.

The house is owned by Wilson’s nephew, Paul Ellis, and he is seeking your input on how to reuse this historic property.

SLIDE 29

The New Granada Theatre in the Hill was designed in 1927 by the African American architect Louis Bellinger as the home of the Knights of Pythias, an African American lodge. It later became the New Granada Theatre and Savoy Ballroom, where jazz greats like Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, and Cab Calloway performed.

The New Granada fell on hard times in the last few decades. Restoration is underway by the Hill Community Development Corporation, but your ideas are needed for how this wonderful historic site can take on a new life.

SLIDE 30

Built in 1915 by architect Thomas H. Scott, the Garden Theater is one of Pittsburgh's oldest neighborhood theaters. It too, fell on hard times in the 1970s as an under-utilized adult movie theater.

Owned by the city's Urban Redevelopment Authority since 2007, the URA is developing feasibility plans for the theater, in cooperation with the neighborhood. After its nomination by the Mexican War Streets Society in 2007, the theater obtained City Historic Structure Designation, which protects the theater from demolition. Much community input is needed to determine the appropriate market to ensure its future viability.

SLIDE 31

The last property we feature was the home of the nation's first black opera company, called the National Negro Opera Company, which was started in 1941 by Mary Cardwell Dawson, shown here. She taught many of the nation's best opera singers and musicians, such as Ahmad Jamal, right from this house.

Vacant since the late 1990s, the house has been vandalized on the interior and exterior. As I explained earlier, YPA helped to stabilize the house and re-dedicate the historical marker. But creative ideas are needed to return this house to its former glory.

If you haven't already chosen which site you would like to see, please do so and join one of four facilitators, who will lead a tour of each property.

Each bus can only accommodate 32 people, so if you don't get the tour of your choice, see if any of the other tours have room.

If all of the buses are filled up, we also have a walking tour of the Oakland Square Historic District, just a few blocks away, led by architect Nathan Hart.

The buses will return here by 11:45 and you will have lunch in the Cloister, the glass-enclosed space in the middle of the building.

SLIDE 32

Immediately following lunch, at 1:00, please join us in honoring our special guest Michael Tomlan, director of historic preservation at Cornell University, as he delivers our keynote address.

From 1:30 to 3:00, each tour group will break out into separate rooms to brainstorm about ideas for reusing the historic sites you just saw. We'll return back here in the Auditorium at 3:00 and each group will report on their recommendations.

SLIDE 33

Finally, please join us at the Carnegie Museum of Art for the Preservation Awards Reception, hosted by the Post-Gazette's Tony Norman. We will award \$500 to the best student-produced videos on historic preservation and honor a very special person with our Promise Award.

SLIDE 34 (LAST SLIDE)

It is a new day for Pittsburgh! We must create a new Pittsburgh by preserving the past. We don't live forever, but the legacy that people leave behind lives on in all of us.

Thank you for giving life to history.