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Rendell delivers to Brownsville

By [Marsha Forys](#)
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Bands were playing, flags were flying and the sun was shining for Gov. Ed Rendell's visit to Brownsville on Wednesday, and the state's top leader didn't disappoint the large crowd that gathered to welcome him.

Arriving to the Brownsville Area High School band playing "Happy Days are Here Again," Rendell presented the distressed Mon Valley town with a check for \$150,000.

The grant money, from the governor's Office of Housing & Community Revitalization and the Department of Community & Economic Development, comes on the heels of a \$125,000 state grant that was used by the borough last year to purchase the former Odd Fellows building in the heart of downtown.

This latest funding is earmarked by Brownsville officials to set up offices in the renovated building, located at 31 Market St., and hire a full-time code enforcement officer, along with legal and secretarial assistance.

Photo Gallery



[Gov. Ed Rendell speaks to a crowd Wednesday](#)

Kenneth Brooks/Tribune-Review

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It's all part of Project BRIGHT Tomorrow -- "Brownsville's Revitalization for a Great Home Town," according to Jeri Stumpf, special assistant for urban affairs with the governor's office and a strategic investment officer assigned to Brownsville.

Stumpf said the hope is that stricter code enforcement will force property owners in the town's central business district to clean up their act.

He pointed to the town's many assets, including its location on the Monongahela River and its underutilized wharf. But he also acknowledged that, for years, many downtown buildings have sat empty and crumbling despite efforts by borough officials to

encourage businesses to locate there and have property owners held accountable.

In presenting the check to borough officials, Rendell announced, "This is meant to say, 'This is Brownsville. We need to bring Brownsville back.'"

Addressing those property owners who have allowed their buildings to deteriorate, Rendell said, "You need to bring your building up to code or we're going to raze it, and we're going to raze it at your expense. ... That's the first part of revitalization. ... Once the buildings are demolished or brought up to code, then we can start to redevelop."

Referring to the strides made in downtown Uniontown in the past year, Rendell said, "We can do it here. This is only step one. We will be back with more money to redevelop the way you want it redeveloped."

Then came a surprise announcement from the governor.

After being pulled aside by Fayette County Commissioner Joe Hardy, Rendell told the crowd that Hardy had offered to match the \$150,000 state grant, giving the borough an even greater boost, and bringing enthusiastic applause from the crowd.

"That will speed up the process," Rendell said of Hardy's gift.

As for Hardy, he praised Rendell's efforts in Uniontown.

"He's an activist. He made it happen. He stepped up there and did it, and now there's hope," Hardy said.

Prior to the governor's arrival yesterday, Hardy commented on the town's efforts.

"It starts within, and it grows. The citizens of Brownsville are the prime force. You get them together, and you can't stop the force," Hardy said. "There are a lot of hard choices to be made, but it has to happen here and it will."

While there were plenty of accolades being offered yesterday, no one received higher praise than Brownsville Mayor Norma Ryan, who has spearheaded the revitalization movement in recent years.

Rendell joked about how Ryan lobbied him for funding even before he was elected to the state's top post.

"I can't say enough about Mayor Ryan," said Stumpf, who has spent a considerable amount of time in the borough since October. "She's a dynamo, and she inspires the kind of community spirit you need."

"Norma is absolutely unrelenting," said state Rep. William DeWeese, who represents the borough.

Anthony Vigliotti, a Brownsville native, has lived in the borough for much of his 56-year marriage to his wife, Marian. Together, they have seen the town's good times and the bad.

"I hope this opportunity is the first step in bigger and better things to come," said Marian Vigliotti. "The mayor and BRIGHT have done a great job in bringing this all together."

Humbled by the praise, Ryan said, "When you have a passion for your town and a vision for its rebirth, you have to work at it. It's not just me; it's a huge group of supporters.

"I know there's potential here, and I feel thrilled that this is just the beginning."

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