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Downtown Brownsville project sparks hope for a comeback

Scott Beveridge Jan 20, 2018 Updated Jan 20, 2018



Scott Beveridge/Observer-Reporter

A mixture of new construction and restoration work has transformed blight into a row of buildings about to open in downtown Brownsville.

Scott Beveridge

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A Fayette County man climbed into a manhole a year ago to get inside a vacant downtown Brownsville landmark and steal one of its bronze front doors to sell for scrap.

The theft from the Union Station building is an example of the difficulty the borough faces in preventing people from breaking into a string of blighted empty buildings in the once-bustling historic downtown along the Monongahela River.

"It's a constant battle," said Brownsville's new mayor, Ross Swords Jr., who took office this month at a time when a multimillion-dollar construction project was wrapping up and offering hope that the downtown is poised to make a comeback.

TREK Development Group of Pittsburgh embarked on a nearly \$8 million investment in the area known as The Neck that involved remaking the five-story former G.C. Murphy Co. building into an apartment complex. The effort also involved the construction of an attached four-story building on the site where the Redevelopment Authority of Fayette County demolished two crumbling structures. The buildings house 24 apartments that are being marketed to senior citizens based on their incomes.

Swords said there is a need for housing after residents of a nearby apartment building were evicted over building code violations.

"We're starting to see some success here," said Andrew P. French, the authority's executive director.

Brownsville's downtown was allowed to deteriorate after a Munhall couple purchased many buildings in the 1990s with a grand plan to redevelop the borough into a gambling destination, among other things, but the initiatives never materialized.

The authority stepped in in 2008 and eventually took ownership of 24 of the buildings through eminent domain, promising to work with local residents to save as many of the properties as possible.

The gamble appears to be working.

Local high school students designed a \$307,000 stage in a new park across the street from the TREK buildings. The stage was funded by state and national grants from the Jefferson Awards Foundation.

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That project and other initiatives drew the attention of TREK.

"A lot of things are being sparked," said Herbert "Mitch" Mitchell, vice president of Brownsville Area Revitalization Corp., a nonprofit organization that has been restoring other buildings in the Fayette County borough.

Mitchell said BARC can take credit for demonstrating to TREK that "someone is doing something" in Brownsville.

BARC has restored the Flatiron Building and attracted a pharmacy to the borough, both of which are in The Neck.

Mitchell also credits fellow BARC member Norma Ryan for leading the town's rebirth, noting she always preached, "Save, save, save, when everyone else might want to come in and bulldoze everything."

He said a mix of strategic demolition and preservation worked well for the TREK project.

"You get a winning solution for everyone," he said.

While the TREK project is a good complement to the area, Brownsville still has many other blighted buildings to deal with, French said.

"It's an uphill battle," he said.

"Slowly, people are interested in the properties," Swords said. "It's starting to bounce back."

Scott Beveridge

Staff Writer

Scott Beveridge is a North Charleroi native who has lived most of his life in nearby Rostraver Township. He is a general assignments reporter focusing on investigative journalism and writing stories about the mid-Mon Valley.



DUNLAP'S CREEK BRIDGE

An integral part of the National Road, this was the first metal arch bridge in the United States, built 1836-39. Replacing several earlier bridges on this site, including an 1809 Finley suspension bridge, this 80-foot span was built of cast iron by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers. Capt. Richard Delafield and Lieut. George W. Cass oversaw construction.

PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF HIGHWAYS

This is the south end of The Neck in Brownsville as it appeared a decade ago. The former G.C. Murphy building is third from the left.

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