

## A BETTER BERKS?

Monday, the first of May, 2006

Along the ridges of the Blue and South mountains, by the valleys of the Schuylkill River and its tributaries, the morning sun filters through the mist of one of Pennsylvania's most physically exquisite counties.

Twelve-year-old Walter Gerlach is getting a ride to the Oley Middle School in his father's pickup truck, the tires spinning out a fine spray of water from the night's rain. Yet, as quiet pastures with their barns and traditional Pennsylvania stone farmhouses pass by in a blur, Walter's mind is a dozen miles away, replaying the excitement of last night's Reading Phillies game in Municipal Stadium.

At the same moment, a mile or so from the field where the Phillies play, past homes with their jagged rooftops, another 12-year-old is on his way to school, too. His name is Roberto Alvarado. As he walks to Northwest Middle School, Roberto's mind is focused, like Walter's, on the exciting Phillies victory Sunday evening.

Two boys.

One county, one city, one ballgame.

But one community?

Imagine that Reading Phillies owner Craig Stein had invited winners of a 2005 Berks County Little League All Star Team, Walter and Roberto included, to enjoy that Sunday game as his guest. The boys not only share a passion for the national sport, they've visited back and forth repeatedly over the winter through a program arranged by the Berks Coalition for a Healthy Community initiative. Their families have gotten to know each other. They're both psyched for the new ball season.

But wait. Is that the more likely future for the youth of Berks County?

Consider a darker, less positive early 21st century, one in which Roberto and Walter are quite unlikely ever to meet. They may have been at the same ballgame, maybe glanced at the seat where the other sat.

But Roberto's parents have warned their son that the ruling Anglos of Berks County are hostile, that they surely don't hire Latinos for anything but the most menial jobs. And Walter knows how his folks feel, that it's dangerous to hang out with that urban Latino crowd. Too many are on drugs; they're unruly.

Indeed, Walter has heard his parents suggest they'd be just as happy if Reading, with its steadily rising Latino population, would slip into the Schuylkill River and float out to sea.

Does it make a difference if Roberto and Walter meet, have a relationship? Does it matter if thousands of other young people of Berks County, from across the city and ethnic and religious lines, are encouraged to know each other as human beings? Will the Berks County of 2006 be headed for unity or deep, embittered divisions?

In the following articles, we first depict " Bad Berks," the divided society, unconnected, suspicious, out of control of its future. Then we contrast that vision to " Bright Berks," a smarter place because its people know each other, leadership is developed, and folks think strategically about the future.

Then we go on to specific challenges, ranging from race relations to government to downtown and economic development, in each case urging course corrections or quite new directions.

Many people talked to us about the great stability in Berks County's innate conservatism, grounded in its Pennsylvania German heritage. This is also a county with major corporations, economic stability and educational levels the envy of some of Pennsylvania's hard-hit cities and counties.

Yet, if Berks conservatism dooms change and reform almost before it can be debated, then the county could be headed for a bleak future.

We've enjoyed the opportunity to get to know your community and its people. In these articles, we've tried not only to point out problems, but to provide some new ideas. We hope they help.

## **BAD BERKS . . .**

A decade from now, if things keep slipping, how bad might it be in Berks County?

We asked county leaders from business and government, from education, from towns and neighborhoods, from the medical community.

They poured forth a torrent of concerns about inaction and indifference that may lead to a bad tomorrow for the city and county.

Their worry is not that malevolence - the work of a handful of skinheads and neo-Nazis, for example - will undermine the region's future. It's more that the county will sink under the weight of indifference, a historic attitude rooted partially in Pennsylvania German culture that says: " I take care of my problems. You take care of yours."

The leaders seem to fear the community will divert its eyes from - and never truly address - the dilemmas of ethnic separation, growing crime, a deteriorating city economy, and Berks County's imperiled landscape and threatened quality of life.

Which are the most dangerous trends?

First, more and more people might write off Reading. If we heard it once, we heard it a hundred times. People across Berks are saying of their county seat: " I don't go there anymore." " It's dangerous."

" It's not like it used to be." " It has a black or brown face."

" I don't need it."

This casual way of declaring Reading's irrelevance is a kind of cancer. It becomes a thoughtless, paralyzing cultural assumption. It may dawn on folks too late that writing off Reading is writing off the region.

For example, the tax-rate disparity between Reading and Berks County's boroughs and townships would continue to mount, actively destroying the center of the region.

As the City in Peril series has documented in the Sunday Reading Eagle, the city and county tax rates are widely disparate, and the gap seems likely to get wider. Reading's millage rate of 10.6 mills is twice the next highest borough (Temple) and nearly 10 times the average for all other municipalities in the county.

These are breathtaking differences, almost incomprehensible to people from outside Pennsylvania and the region. They are triggering rapid hemorrhaging of businesses and middle-class people to the suburbs. Unchecked, they promise to grow deeper and deeper into the next century.

Why should the people of other municipalities care? Mounting research on regions across America shows that the long-term prosperity of the suburbs is tied to the prosperity of center cities. The greater the difference, the lower the suburban incomes. Over time, a sinking center city drags down an entire region's economy.

Second, a disastrously failing inner city gives a whole region a black eye. Industrial

recruitment is paralyzed. People and businesses subconsciously try to find less forbidding areas in which to do business.

Third, suburban residents will lose jobs. Employers who flee the city for its high taxes may not stop at the Berks border, but flee the region. The jobs are then lost.

Fourth, the economic desperation caused by the astronomical city tax rates forces thousands of hard-working people to give up their homes. Owners get turned into renters. Discretionary income goes down, and Berks County merchants feel the pinch.

Fifth, huge chunks of city property - center city and in neighborhoods - plummet in value as taxes on them soar. Whose loss is it? Very often, landowners and corporate owners based in the city's own suburbs.

Today, the relative health of the Berks County economy, bolstered by 7,000 small to medium-size employers and such corporate giants as Carpenter Technology Corp. and VF Corp., masks these effects. But the net gap between where the county is and where it and its residents could be is still significant. In a recession - almost sure to occur by 2006, if past economic cycles are any guide - the dire consequences of inaction will be glaringly clear.

Continued isolation of the city will create more poverty, more desperation and, inevitably, higher crime.

Suburbanites' contempt for the city won't keep those problems sealed within. The crime leaks out, whether it's drugs dealt countywide, or car theft, or burglary, or outright assaults.

And crime costs crawl into everybody's pocketbook. Fresh evidence: Berks County officials asked for and got a 39.8-percent property-tax increase in 1996. One of the fastest rising budget expenditures is the placement of juveniles in rehabilitation facilities. Let those costs keep climbing by 10 percent or more a year, to 2006, and many suburban and rural Berks residents will find themselves in the same incredibly painful cost squeeze felt by many Reading residents today.

Declining use and support for the rich cultural heritage of the city - its parks, concert halls, theaters, museums & ; will not only undermine the economy, but increasingly strain the sense of community and the area's unique identity.

Reading has a magnificent cultural history. The Reading Choral Society is the second oldest in America, its symphony the 14th oldest. The Reading Public Museum has a rich collection of important exhibits. The parks, at the base of Mount Penn and spread through other parts of the city, are of rare quality for a city of Reading's size. These are

cultural jewels of incredible value. But aversion to, or fear of, the city is depressing their use.

Great cities dare not stop investing. This is why, as outsiders, we were astounded to note the Berks County commissioners' reluctance to approve a simple hotel room tax for the proposed civic center in downtown Reading, even when the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has already pledged major funding for its construction. Does this murmuring, this shuffling of feet, presage official decision to abandon the city?

Such facilities are in fact one-of-a-kind for a region. If a civic center isn't built in downtown Reading, will it somehow appear as another anonymous, low-slung brick building such as the faceless structures housing the Social Security and IRS facilities that fled the city for Wyomissing? Or, in 2006, will county employees be clamoring to move their offices to Wyomissing because they think it's too dangerous to work in the historic county seat?

As the city declines, bidding to become another Chester, a residential push from the Philadelphia area leads eastern Berks County municipalities to cash in as much as they can, allowing farms and exquisite open spaces to be sold off for faceless development.

(The irony is that there's a blueprint on the books that would stop this - the Berks County Comprehensive Plan. It's clearly oriented to preserving the county's farms and natural beauty and minimizing congestion.)

But in a "Bad Berks" scenario for the next decade, township and borough officials figuratively will thumb their noses at the county, approving any taxpaying development they want, no matter what the plan says about protecting that land. And suddenly, almost irrational fears will lead developers to start building Berks County's first gated communities, complete with high walls and guards to keep non-residents out.

In the meantime, traffic congestion reminiscent of what Lancaster County already suffers intensifies across Berks. And the pattern of suburban sprawl increases pressure on roads faster than new ones (such as the Park Road Corridor) can be built.

Finally, by 2006 it's overwhelmingly clear that elected county and city officials either can't or won't exert strong leadership. Corporate leaders appear more and more preoccupied by their firms' national and international positioning. Most executives express utter cynicism about Berks County's governments, and refuse to become personally involved. And two major corporations, disgusted with the local paralysis, fearful they'll be associated with the crime and poverty of Reading, announce they're moving & ; one to Provo, Utah, the other to Charlotte, N.C.

## **BRIGHT BERKS . . . WHERE WE COULD GO . . .**

Assume that Berks County, by the year 2006, can regain its confidence and muster its strengths. How does it get there from here? What follows are some of the goals we heard from a broad array of neighborhood, city, township and business leaders:

First, the area should seek strong economic growth, but not at the price of destroying the county's unique landscape.

The means most often suggested is insistence that townships and boroughs follow the county's comprehensive plan, and that they involve the public - not just landowners and political leaders - in major development decisions. That way, farmlands would be protected and the traditional communities - from Hamburg to Kutztown to Birdsboro to Morgantown - would succeed in preserving their sense of place without nonstop development blurring their identity.

By 2006, passenger rail service would finally be restored between Philadelphia and downtown Reading, the result of years of studies, debate and finally Route 422's congestion and air quality ripening into full scale emergencies. The service is "light rail," compared to the locomotive-hauled trains of Reading railroad lore. It would cost a lot of money to get up and running. Some folks say it's not worth the investment. But, it would help to restore the county's self confidence.

Some of the pressure for new subdivisions would get diverted to revival of city neighborhoods. As for the road system, major missing links would be filled in, minimizing roads to nowhere. Expanded BARTA service, both big buses and minivans, would scoot across the county, keeping pace with population growth and preventing new bottlenecks.

By 2006, the city could boast a healthy economy, based on competitive and fair taxes achieved through a combination of radically reorganized and more economic city government and equity negotiations with its Berks County neighbors.

With the rebound, more renters would become homeowners, properties would get rehabilitated, neighborhoods would be strengthened. Penn Square would again become the county's civic epicenter and favorite gathering spot. The empty spaces of the '90s would fill up with hundreds of small entrepreneurial enterprises, many owned by Latinos and other minorities.

The long-proposed civic center would be built, joining a new 7,000-seat sports and concert arena with the Rajah Theatre and injecting new energy into multiple center-city attractions - the Abe Lincoln Hotel and the new inter-modal transit center included.

Business incubators and other new projects would fill the buildings vacated by construction of the big Meridian-CoreStates structure at 6th and Penn streets. To complement downtown revival, the old rail yards to the north would be converted into an urban park ringed with new housing that helps to return a wave of middle-class investment.

Second, the right and expectation to go anywhere in Berks County and be safe and respected - no matter who you are & ; would be accomplished.

The Wyomissing housewife would park downtown without the fear she might have felt a few years before. The hostile youth culture of the '90s would be reversed. Few people would think it was anything special (or fearful) if a group of Latino teens walked by them along the path at Gring's Mill Recreation Area.

Could any of this possibly come true? What sort of magical transformation would have to occur for the land to be protected, transportation improved, Reading's city tax base restored, downtown rejuvenated, crime and suspicion allayed?

Surely, if the county waits, Pennsylvania-style, for political maneuvering, for government as usual to solve these problems, it may be necessary to reach for a 22nd century calendar.

Nor can one expect business, alone, to make a lot of progress occur. In past times, a handful of civic-minded business tycoons, in steel or textiles, made decisions for Reading and Berks - sometimes pretty well. Today, the community looks to a multitude of organizations.

The Greater Reading Economic Partnership, the Berks County Chamber of Commerce, the Berks Business Executives Forum, the Manufacturers Association of Berks County, the Reading Eagle and Reading Times, the Downtown Improvement District, the United Way of Berks County, the Berks County Community Foundation - all in their own way are doing their best to secure a better future for both the city and county.

But as well intentioned as they are, will their cumulative impact be sufficient to turn the county around, to turn around the civic scene in the next 10 years? We think not, and no one we interviewed thought so. Indeed, one leader after another, in one turn of phrase or another, admitted, " We're stuck."

We did, however, hear of one resource. It's a fresh and creative resource. It's ideally distributed across Berks County. It's waiting to be tapped. It's the county's teen-agers and young adults - its next generation.

We're not talking about a youth rebellion, adolescents taking over a corporation, a government, a school or university. What we do mean is turning to young people as a catalyst, a conscience, a thinking force to be heard and respected. Teen-agers and young adults in their 20s are the group with the strongest stake in the county's long-run future. They should have the most right to demand better outcomes.

Many adults may scoff at the idea of young people as a force for better public policy. You can just hear people repeating the stereotypes: Young people are too jaded to care, too many are airheads, their brains are pickled by massive doses of MTV. Even a teen-ager's own parent, viewing the kid's bedroom as a hazardous waste zone, may doubt whether he or she is ready to be a community leader.

But, in interviews across America we've found adolescents amazingly serious, concerned about the future of their communities. They may not have read all the official reports, or gone to all the hearings. But they do care. They may not have the weighty self-interest born of property holdings or long ideological commitment. They can and do think openly, express themselves with candor, and ask trenchant questions. They represent an immense civic resource, waiting to be tapped.

Teen-agers, in their unorganized and unfocused way, could hardly constitute a strong civic force. Fortuitously, the hospitals of Berks County have supported, over the last several months, the establishment of a so-called Berks Coalition for a Healthy Community.

Popularized nationally by the National Civic League, the idea of the healthy community movement, now prospering in cities spread from South Bend to Detroit, Orlando to Boulder, is that hospitals, clinics and doctors alone can't serve human health adequately. Jobs, the environment, social conditions, treatment of children are just as & ; if not more - critical to people's long-term health.

Mayor Dan Kemmis of Missoula, Mont., a prime exponent of the movement, argues that healthy communities depend on such unlikely subjects as a sense of history to which citizens relate, affordable housing, trail systems, urban design, open space, air quality and employment opportunities.

The Berks County Coalition for a Healthy Community has already launched a series of open meetings, assembled a group of stakeholders. These are not just the established, middle-class, middle-age Berks Countians, but people of all races and incomes. It is perhaps the most diverse group assembled in the county's history.

They began to work deeply with groups of students and young adults across the county. We asked one, a young ex-Marine hospital worker of Latino extraction, why he was



involved. His reply: " I have children, I live here. I traveled to 13 countries with the U.S. Marines, places where I was supposed to feel strange. But I came home and experienced culture shock. In this city, everyone has a narrow self-interest. When I was young, you had your friends and didn't have to worry about someone having a gun. But today you do. I have one small child. I don't want that world for him."

All cities' healthy communities efforts identify what stakeholders see as the most vital strategic issues for their areas, then devise initiatives and distribute responsibilities to address them. Our suggestion is that the Berks County healthy community effort take a road as yet untraveled. Project leaders could organize sponsors, staff, arrangers and facilitators for the county's teen-agers and young adults. Youthful countians, from all area schools and communities, could then become players in the community's public business.

One can imagine up to a dozen countywide task forces of teen-agers showing interest in, and monitoring, what the adult establishment is accomplishing. We're not talking about such areas as school reform, open space and farm preservation, tax equalization and reform, transportation, and the imaginative revival of downtown Reading for the benefit of the whole region.

Countywide mass meetings of teen-agers might identify other areas of pressing interest to them, from drug and alcohol abuse to teen-age pregnancy to identifying safe places for young people to gather on weekends. The writers for the Reading Eagle and Reading Times weekly Voices section, one of the more insightful group of young folks we've met in a long time, could be enlisted for ideas and for coverage of the youth activities.

We believe the newspapers' regular reporters would also find a rich set of stories in what the county's teen-agers, as they build expertise on critical issues, have to say about those issues and the quality of local leaders' performance. The young people's accountability sessions & ; whether with county commissioners, City Council, school boards, business leaders, planning commissions or others - could raise fundamental, fresh issues that would make compelling stories. The youth committees might also be invited for lively exchanges on Berks Community Television and Channel 69, for example.

One can also envision the young people working with their sponsors in the healthy communities movement to create new ways for youth from city and county & ; Anglo, Latino, Asian, African-American - to get to know and work with each other, allaying today's suspicion and crime-breeding divisions. In real life, this may be the way that Roberto and Walter - those fictional boys with the common interest in baseball whom we discussed in the introduction of this series & ; get to meet each other.

On some issues, the young people could be real shock troops traveling out to appear before town and borough councils. For example, they could speak up when proposals for new commercial or subdivision development would violate the conservationist principles of the county comprehensive plan.

The young people's vested interest is in an unspoiled county, not in whether the township gets some immediate tax revenue or whether a local farmer can sell his land for development and move to Florida. How refreshing for the voice of the future to be heard, for once!

The educational potential for young people in these activities could be as dramatic as their short-term impact on the community. Inevitably, young people who have taken part in this kind of experience will understand problems in a deeper, more complex way. They become much more sophisticated about the way decisions are made. They learn how to work collaboratively with people of strongly contrasting backgrounds. And they are constantly reminded that their lives can make a difference.

With the help of healthy community volunteers, time could be arranged for these involved teen-agers to meet, exchange experiences, get adult feedback in a supportive environment and reflect on their own successes and failures.

College students performing community service would be natural allies and coworkers in this effort, a bridge perhaps between teen-agers and those in their young 20s. (Alvernia College has been Berks County's leader in community service. Now there's a consortium of all the county's colleges to encourage broadened student community service.)

The Berks community could benefit in several ways from a strong intervention by its youth. First and foremost, the youth initiative could create the catalytic power that's required to hold Berks County's public and civic feet to the fire with sensible, timely interference with the stale status quo.

The next generation's civic leadership would start forming sooner, learning in the process. Powerful role models would be provided for the young people not involved. And thousands of young people would develop, by action, by taking leadership, by early and lasting commitment to Berks County - experiences likely to persuade many to stay in Berks rather than move after high school or college.

There are thousands of American communities with forms of youth volunteerism - mentoring, literacy training, environmental conservation, service to the elderly and disabled, and more. Racine, Wis., wants to become America's most youth-friendly community and is moving to get there. It's asking young people, for example, to design

and conduct a broad-gauged survey on ways youth believe the community could be made more open to them. In Columbus, Ind., teens surveyed 350 square miles of the community to produce a comprehensive map of youth resources and programs and to pinpoint what's missing.

Youth Net in Kansas City links block leaders - responsible older teens - with younger children they mentor and assist. In New Haven, Conn., youth are actually engaged in passing on the fitness of rookie police officers before they hit the street, leading to constructive "attitude fixes."

Close to Berks County, a Greater Philadelphia High School Convocation Project - aimed at breaking down barriers of race and class, city and suburb - has been launched by the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Greater Philadelphia. The goal is to get young people from 250 high schools involved in joint projects to promote regional cooperation and encourage volunteerism.

And right in Berks, near Kutztown, the Rodale Research Center puts high school groups through a full-day mock development project. Playing roles ranging from farmers to developers to citizen activists, the young people get the flavor of decision making in the real world.

Each such program contributes both to the community and development of more complete young people.

But, in the youth public policy initiative suggested here, Berks County could take a bold step by inviting its young people into the arena of active and continuing leadership on a scale, we believe, that no other American community has ever attempted.

## **THE RACIAL DILEMMA**

In a county still overwhelmingly white, of German or Polish or Italian ancestry, the growing number of African-Americans and the dramatic increase in the Latino population appear to have been a real shock.

"The city of Reading is increasingly an enclave for ethnic groups," one elected official told us. "The element now coming in is damaging the tax base and overburdening the school system. Not to be prejudicial, lots of the people are mixed up in the drug trade, and a lot of the drug customers are from out of state."

In contrast, one Reading resident told us: "I came from Puerto Rico six years ago, where we think of ourselves as American citizens. Here we aren't treated as American

citizens. People remind you again and again you're a Hispanic. . . . That makes us forget we have the same rights and responsibilities as full American citizens."

Said one Latino leader: " There's a mindset out there in the county that if we stick to our beliefs this Latino population will go away. It won't."

To our mind, there's no doubt Latinos are in Berks County to stay & ; and grow. Example: While the population of Reading continues its long decline, the enrollment in Reading's public schools has been rising for more than half a decade.

There is only one explanation. Latinos - Puerto Rican, Mexican, Central American, Colombian - tend to have larger families and are the most rapidly growing group in the city today. As a result, minority students represent 60 percent of the Reading School District population, up from 39 percent 10 years ago. Latinos constitute 45 percent of the student body, up from 25 percent in the same time period.

An immense ethnic divide has sprung up between Reading and the rest of Berks County. The city has a minority population of 40 percent, while the county outside of the city is 98 percent white. Though the lines may soften with time, right now Latinos are more highly concentrated in center-city Reading than in any other metropolitan region in America.

A world of cultural adjustment lies ahead. The lifestyles of the new folks are tough for Reading old-timers, especially the elderly, to understand. At the same time, the emerging minorities find themselves in the midst of a quite new and alien culture.

There is a significant gulf between the city and the closer-in, more worldly-wise inner suburbs such as Muhlenberg Township and Wyomissing. But, it's greatest of all between the Latinos and other newcomers and folks in the outer reaches of Berks County, home to some of the most traditional, ethnically untouched Pennsylvania German communities anywhere.

And the problem is not to be dismissed lightly. We were chilled to hear one official predict a " growing Bosnification of the county." He said he believed restrictive welfare proposals were the way to stop the Latino population influx.

Some Latinos feel such attitudes acutely, and deeply resent them.

Said one Latino woman: " I have lived around America, but I was never obliged to feel a minority as much as here. You have to prove yourself over and over again. Go into a department store in jeans, in fact, and you'll be followed. I think I'm sophisticated enough to handle it. But how about younger people, children in particular? The anger

starts to accumulate, and then gets channeled, perhaps inappropriately."

We asked another top local official about the problem. His response: " Given the differences in our culture, and the hard economics of these times, this will be a tough one to address. It's a bomb waiting to explode."

## THE DISPARITY STORY

The harsh realities facing African-American and Latino families in Berks County were highlighted in the United Way's Berks 2000 community-wide needs assessment. It showed, for example, that 43 percent of Latino and 23 percent of black families lived below the poverty line in 1989. Based on its own survey, United Way was able to contrast how much specific problems affected white families, compared to Latino and African-American families:

	<b>WHITE</b>	<b>LATINO</b>	<b>BLACK</b>
<i>Not able to find work</i>	9%	41%	42%
<i>Not being able to get or pay for medical insurance</i>	10%	30%	32%
<i>Not having enough money to pay the doctor or buy prescription medicine</i>	10%	41%	32%
<i>Not having enough money to pay for housing</i>	6%	22%	26%
<i>Living in housing that needs major repairs</i>	5%	22%	26%

## WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

A future of non-communicating, hostile ethnic groups is pure poison for Berks County's future.

First, it violates practically every religious tenet of the region's people; Christian, Jewish, Muslim or other.

Second, it would mean that the majority society may ignore, even quash many of the entrepreneurial energies of the newcomers.

Third, it may lead to two ugly forms of exploitation. The majority culture could perpetuate poverty among minorities by failure to associate and do business, and that could mean the minorities - especially the embittered youth - could respond by turning to crime.

It may be understandable for the native Anglo population to feel consternation about the community's rapid population change, to abhor the poverty of some of the newcomers, to fear rising crime. But turn the clock back a couple of decades. Imagine low-income Anglos moving into a Puerto Rican or Central American community, and the reverse set of feelings might have surfaced.

What's more, resistance to immigrants is an age-old American problem. It occurs in virtually every generation and we have confronted it throughout history. But the ultimately effective answers never lie in denial, in erecting gates, in repression. One can run from a changing American demography, but not for long. The successful answers always lie in constructive engagement, assimilation, economic opportunity.

Anglo Berks County needs to recognize the new Latino population has legitimate aspirations. These people have come looking for a better life, for more opportunity for their children. Their version of El Sueno Americano - the American Dream - is strikingly close to that of everyone else.

If a drug trade by Latino youth is a problem, then there must be an effort to engage the adult, responsible members of the Latino community in dialogue on how to find solutions. Perhaps intensified community policing is part of the solution, or youth recreation programs, or serious job outreach, or even tougher law enforcement. Of course, tougher enforcement would have to be even-handed, a crackdown against not only Latino street dealers but their overwhelmingly white suburban customers.

To us, it seems clear that a thousand and one forms of personal dialogue must be created and sustained to demystify the racial divide, to help people learn about their mutual aspirations, to create personal ties. The capacity to do that may be beginning - in Reading's schools, where the changing demography is captured in one place. Some of the young Reading High School students we've talked with left us optimistic they're beginning to build bridges over the racial chasms in a way their parents generally haven't managed.

What's more, there's good news from the Police Athletic League, which is starting race relations dialogues, and the Central YMCA, which is drawing strength from Alvernia

College's Black Student Union in its efforts to foster leadership skills and involvement in 12- to 16-year-old city youngsters.

But much more is needed. Why couldn't inner-city churches (Latino or black) form informal one-on-one alliances with suburban churches and meet once or twice a year for a picnic or art fair, with time allowed for some informal conversations? Some of the walls of fear might be breached that way.

The arts have proved, incidentally, to be a powerful form of intercultural communication. We believe Berks County could do itself a great favor by celebrating diversity rather than fearing it. Churches, colleges and citizen groups might sponsor more ethnic festivals featuring painting, sculpture and shared musical and dance performances.

Such efforts would soon show that, while Latinos represent the fastest growing ethnic group in Berks, they are by no means alone. The largest group of new U.S. citizens recently sworn in at the Berks County Services Center were from Vietnam, followed by natives of the Dominican Republic, Romania, Colombia, India, Korea and Poland.

Albright College attracts students from such far-flung nations as India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Japan, Sri Lanka and Zambia & ; a rich resource to introduce Berks Countians, young and old, to the new global village.

Surely the Berks Coalition for a Healthy Community can and should think strategically about opportunities for inter-racial discussions. For example, project leaders could work to get Latino or black kids included in some suburban-based Boy Scout or Girl Scout troops, or in Little League competitions.

In addition, Berks County government has rather sophisticated programs, through its office of aging, to mobilize foster grandparents and other outreach programs of the elderly. A number of Berks school districts have actually identified the elderly as resources to work with young people. The healthy community effort could add fresh support to such efforts, carrying them across school and municipal lines to a new level of effectiveness.

How about taking a program of proven success and giving it a different twist?

For years, Berks County has participated in the Fresh Air program, which brings underprivileged children from New York City to spend several weeks with Berks County families. Since many minority children already live in Reading, wouldn't it be a good idea to broaden the program to include them?

To Berks County's credit, some outreach efforts to minorities, especially on the

economic front, have begun. Leadership Berks has sought consciously to get young minority professionals into its classes, although it should probably redouble its efforts, especially to pull in more Latinos. The Berks County Chamber of Commerce has a low-key effort to encourage entrepreneurial activity among the new populations.

And Berks Mindco - the minority development council effort begun by the dean of the Kutztown University business department, the president of an engineering firm and a successful black entrepreneur - has been making big strides in providing formal training and counsel to get 62 new small businesses launched. With honors graduate and undergraduate students and others volunteering as counselors, the program emphasizes the joint benefits to minority participants and to its own students.

Berks Mindco has taken the African proverb, " It takes a village to raise a child," and adapted it to its mission. Thus, " It takes a community to raise an entrepreneur." The theme of community responsibility is clearly the key to a tolerant, successful Berks County in future years.

## **GOVERNMENT: NO CHOICE BUT TO CHANGE?**

If Reading, the heart of Berks County, were a hospital patient, you'd send it to intensive care.

Consider the city's grave vital signs - seriously decaying infrastructure, huge numbers of absentee landlords and a record of irrationally enforced codes. Add to that high concentrations of poverty, ballooned debt, falling population, and property tax yields declining while tax rates soar astronomically.

Some of the problem is doubtless political. One well-placed citizen told us the quality of City Council was on the upswing, but still: " We have a Balzacian city structure. City officials live to torture you. If they grow to like you, watch out - they may offer you a role to work in their re-election campaign."

The deeper dilemma is the culture of Reading's city government. It's no longer grossly corrupt, as it had been in the bad old days. But despite some mayors of integrity and capacity, basic problems remain. It's a government under the hand of an entrenched bureaucracy, exhibiting no clear organizational identity or mission, whipsawed by unions, and lacking a coherent ethic.

Strangers come to town, notice excess trash on the streets, ask why, and learn that Reading - rare if not unique among modern cities - offers no municipal trash collection. One is told residents are supposed to get private contracts, but that enforcement is so



lax trash too often ends up in empty lots or apartment stairwells. Efforts to get municipal collection are beaten down politically.

Slowly but surely around the country, the icy relations between cities and employee unions are warming. Managements are starting to hear efficiency suggestions from rank-and-file workers and the unions, for their part, are becoming less adversarial.

But not in Reading, where grievance procedures and forced arbitrations remain the order of the day. Unions, we were told, have threatened all manner of injunctions to prevent non-unionized construction jobs from going forward. The union contract, it appears, actually prohibits the deputy fire chief from administering training to firefighters. Only a unionized employee is supposed to do that job.

## **WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?**

Enough is wrong, it would appear, that city voters in 1993 approved an entirely new, radically different city charter. It went into effect just this year and surely represents a giant step forward for the city. The old Reading charter was an operative catastrophe & ; a weak mayor with administrative duties carved up among members of the council. Again and again, voters across the country have tossed out city governments organized as Reading was. The form confuses executive and legislative duties, diffusing authority and accountability.

By contrast, Reading's new form, with a strong mayor and strong city manager balanced by part-time council members representing individual districts, is about as good a design for medium-sized cities as you'll find anywhere today.

The new city administration (aided by its friends and advisers in the business community) deserves solid credit for appointing a highly regarded professional administrator of Stephen Bonczek's caliber.

But the amount of reform city manager Bonczek and Mayor Paul J. Angstadt will have to institute in Reading is little short of breathtaking.

Even if overdrawn, there's likely fire behind the smoke of these citizen complaints. " City of Reading workers never work a full day." " If new people come in and buck the system, they will get pushed back." Or, this comment from a former officeholder: " The city is woefully deficient in professionalism in its own staff."

Just consider the area of building codes, zoning and inspections. Developers and ordinary citizens alike complained to us about unfair, arbitrary and delayed codes, long

delays on inspections, rigidity on the part of inspectors. Sometimes codes are enforced so fiercely that rehabilitation projects (badly needed for the city's economic health) just can't proceed. On other occasions, real perils - rundown properties, vacated gas stations with potentially leaky tanks, burned out buildings & ; go without attention month after month.

A businessman involved in housing rehabilitation told us, " The city kills us on codes - giving parking tickets, for example, to vans and cars of those trying to rehab and bring back some of the city's faltering housing. In one case, a rehab project was delayed for half a year because the city couldn't figure out what house numbers to assign."

One of a group of developers we met said: " Reading is the most difficult place I've done business with in the past 20 years. And I think that's a consensus."

Said another: " You read the ordinances and think you have the system down, but it isn't consistent. The buck never stops, it just floats around."

On controversial licensing and zoning cases, a former official told us, city bureaucrats were left free to over-regulate, in their own rigid way, because their decisions could be, and often were, overruled at the city appeal level. The critical problem with such a system, of course, is the grief and delay it often costs citizens and businesses.

By contrast, some municipalities in Berks County have no building, no electrical, no plumbing codes whatever! Small wonder development gravitates toward them. But doesn't anyone worry about the consequences?

Reading citizens are accustomed to negative news about the city's sewer system, which also serves 13 other municipalities. The facilities have clearly failed to keep up with capacity demand, triggering a state-imposed moratorium on new development, residential or industrial, because of an inadequate collection system.

The perverse result is to inhibit development, not just in the city, but in the close-by municipalities. New housing projects leapfrog to locations farther from the city, violating the prospects for more compact development in and around Reading. In the process, business leaders told us, major industrial prospects have also been lost.

With its new charter, its move to a professional manager, Reading seems to have accomplished the structural change it needs for the future. What it must face now is reinvention of how it does business.

## COUNTY NEEDS TO REORGANIZE

To the casual newspaper reader, it might seem that Berks County mirrors the woes of Reading.

Examples:

The county budget director agrees to resign in the wake of a multi-million dollar deficit and 39.8-percent tax increase. . . . Commissioners argue over whether local engineering firms should have a chance to bid on a study of regionalizing water and sewage treatment. . . . There's controversy over computer needs for the controller's office. . . . A six-year lawsuit over county assessment practices threatens to send the entire county budget into a tailspin.

In matter of fact, the county situation is different than that of Reading. The county's ability to pay its bills, to avoid new debt, is many times greater simply because it has such a wide geographic area, so much more affluence, to tax. County management of the criminal justice system and a variety of social services seems relatively competent.

There are, to be sure, some union problems. We were perplexed to read the county had granted its unionized workers 35-hour work weeks when the rest of the world - even Germany, world headquarters of the short work week - is headed in the opposite direction. Even worse, six years ago a clause forbidding contracting out of county services was written into the county's contract with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. That means the principle of competition, and the major savings it entails, can't be introduced into county government.

But where the county comes up most seriously short is its basic form of organization. There are three separately elected commissioners and a whole array of elected row officers, ranging from controller to treasurer to sheriff to clerk of courts to recorder of deeds, to (would you believe this?) a prothonotary who's supposed to keep track of civil court cases.

The row officers are a hangover from the 19th century. How anyone can believe most voters have any idea of who they are, or which candidate to vote for, is beyond us. As for three county commissioners sharing legislative and administrative responsibilities, that forms an anachronism, too.

Too many decisions, from personnel to programs to budgets, become personal and politicized in an effort to get two of the three on one side. At the same time, the commissioners have a big bureaucracy to run. The system leaves nobody in charge and ultimately accountable, but it does create lots of jobs that the politicians defend with a vengeance.

We believe the citizens' committee that pushed for a new county charter in 1993 had the right idea. Broaden county government to a council of nine part-time legislators, who in turn appoint a professional manager for the county. The nine members of council would provide a much more representative base, reflecting the entire county, than the present commissioners possibly can.

The appointed executive could focus on quality management, the nitty-gritty of day-to-day operations. But that person would also be positioned to look ahead to long-term strategy on big issues such as improvement of the infrastructure for the future, protection of natural resources and development of business and industry.

To their credit, the county commissioners have made some progress on strategic issues - the "department of futures thinking," if you will. The chief example is the Berks 2000 Project, which seeks further cooperation among the 76 townships and boroughs that make up Berks County. The concept was right. Pennsylvania's Byzantine system of municipal government inhibits the community planning critical to progress in a mobile, technologically driven society.

Getting prickly, independent jurisdictions to cooperate is devilishly hard. The entire Berks 2000 process, in the words of its chief author, County Commissioner Glenn B. Reber, was more a process than an event. And the struggle to achieve cooperation continues.

The most important current regionalization issue is the prospect of a single Berks County sewer and water authority empowered to coordinate, plan and manage for the entire region. That requires the existing 24 municipal sewer authorities to give up their small (and unavoidably inefficient) operations - especially since they'll likely find it harder and harder to finance necessary expansions of their microsystems.

Would the Berks County takeover of water and sewer be a hard sell? Of course. But the management problems of the Reading water and sewage authorities cry out for a change of control. Reading may cherish the \$8 million in revenue it now gets from its water authority - 20 percent of its operating revenues in cruelly cash-short times. But Reading is mucking up the management; it doesn't need to be and likely shouldn't be in the business of providing a service for other communities anyway. Somehow, a deal should be cut for county takeover.

A way should also be found for Berks County to take over management of the Reading Regional Airport, now a property of the city. The takeover has been championed by Commissioner Reber, but has received a cool reception from the other commissioners, Randy L. Pyle and Mark C. Scott.

Indeed, the only future vision that makes sense is Berks County government not just assuming more functions, but strategizing and acting for the entire county. Berks is headed, for example, for severe hardening of its transportation arteries without more effective road planning and strong advocacy with the state Department of Transportation.

Mass transit and land-use plans need to be integrated. Social service problems and criminal justice are oblivious to city and township boundaries. All these problems are too closely interconnected to leave any major share of them to a random pattern of decisions made in dozens of boroughs and townships that were formed well over a century ago in a radically different world.

Without major, but unlikely, government reforms decreed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, township and borough powers will remain formidable, especially over land use.

This is where a home-rule charter for the county comes in. With it, the county would have the executive structure necessary to move with more dispatch. It would be better positioned to use the carrot-and-stick approach as a way to induce municipalities to cede de facto control of more functions. For example, the county could offer sewer lines and highway interchanges in exchange for other concessions.

Some extensions of county influence can proceed without home-rule powers. Many others - and the image of a more aggressive, general purpose county government - will depend upon it. Under state law, the next date to place county home rule government before Berks County voters will be in 1998, five years after the last vote. It's not too early to start planning another try.

## **LABOR PAINS: A WIN-WIN ALTERNATIVE**

Do municipal managers and public employee unions have to be at each others' throats? In many cities, unions and local government managers are showing that there are win-win strategies.

In Seattle, the Metro Agency and the Service Employees Union developed a gainsharing program to cut costs in measurable areas such as labor, electricity use and effluent discharge. Workers' ideas saved Metro \$669,000 in the first year – and employees pocketed half the change.

For two decades, the Toledo Express Airport used private contractors for janitorial services. But officials of AFSCME were able to come in with a more competitive

package - even with full health benefits and higher hourly wages - by promising its members would provide a number of services (window cleaning, for example) for which the outside vendors tacked on extra charges.

When Republican Stephen Goldsmith became mayor of Indianapolis in 1992, aiming to privatize every city service he could, the unions saw red. But Goldsmith's focus shifted quickly from privatization at all costs to competition as a core strategy. He became increasingly impressed, said Goldsmith later, with the inherent ability of his own employees to perform better when the system allowed them to.

"I underestimated what they could do if we unloaded the bureaucracy off the top of their heads," he said.

A breakthrough occurred when Indianapolis invited bids for street repairs, previously done by unionized city workers. When the workers discovered that high middle-management costs would make their bid uncompetitive, Goldsmith agreed, cutting 18 expensive slots. The workers revised their proposal to dispatch one truck rather than two on most jobs, and to reduce work crews from eight to five workers. And with that, they won the contract.

Since then, there have been competitions for 60 services in Indianapolis, and the city's workers have won a big share of them. Officially, the AFSCME local still opposes privatization and competition. But it claims victory in fighting wholesale attempted privatization of AFSCME-represented city services. And, it boasts that its demands have been met for guaranteed participation as partners in redesigning government, including radical cuts in management ranks.

What conditions are needed for a new era of labor-management relations? The first requirement, say the experts, is mutual respect, including an emphasis on worker training and advancement. Second, decentralized decision-making is needed, with input solicited from front-line workers. Third, there must be constant emphasis on quality and cost reduction - the same kind of customer-first orientation that makes the best private firms successful.

## **GOVERNMENT REINVENTION FORMULAS**

The private sector could be marshaled to develop ideas that would make government work better in Reading and Berks County.

Berks Countians - like most Pennsylvanians - are accustomed to politics and government as an insider's game of favor and privilege. Tell people anywhere else in the

country, for example, about such customs as Pennsylvania's WAMs - walking around money handed out for the convenience and entrenchment of politicians - and their eyes roll in wonderment.

But there's good news. In Pennsylvania, as well as nationally, the winds of change are blowing. Mayor Ed Rendell's turnaround of Philadelphia government, featuring business-based counsel, sound fiscal plans and competition for delivery of government services, proved the point in this state. And Rendell provides just one example of how, in quite bipartisan and nonpartisan fashion, government is being reinvented to be as responsive and customer friendly as the most progressive private business.

When Diane Feinstein became mayor of San Francisco in the '80s, she enlisted top-level business executives to assist in analyzing operations of the city government, department by department. And then she persuaded many of the businesses to keep up the relationship, in a long-term, one-to-one management consultancy with the departments.

Even before Rendell moved into City Hall in the early '90s, he'd persuaded the city's major corporations to take part in a stern-to-stern review of virtually all of Philadelphia's city operations. Multiple reforms came from that so-called productivity initiative, including the economies required to pull Philadelphia back from the edge of bankruptcy and put its finances on a firm multi-year basis.

Reading has just gotten a positive introduction into the quality advice that can come from the outside. Early this year, the new City Council created an 18-member task force to take an intensive month-long look at city finances. Under Eric P. Jenkins, the group included investment experts, accountants, business people, the Reading Area Community College president, academics, retirees and other citizens.

The group organized itself with subcommittees on such areas as expenses, revenues and personnel (which make up 70 percent of the city budget). It not only decried deficit spending, it pointed to precise areas of potential savings, ranging from a combined and efficient Department of Public Works to privatizing of such functions as the city garage and public property maintenance. It also suggested user fees - actual payments for actual services.

Mayor Paul J. Angstadt called the report invaluable and said it should give a real boost to the city manager. There is talk of expanding the advisory committee, perhaps keeping it on board for an extended period of time. We think that's a stellar idea.

At the same time, the Berks County commissioners voted in March to set up a county government management, productivity and cost control council, made up chiefly of

business figures. Many of the nominees are to be proposed by the Berks County Chamber of Commerce. This new efficiency council would appear to have all the right goals, from looking into possible privatization of some county services to consolidating departments to an improved county computer system.

At this takeoff stage, there's an expanded opportunity the Reading-Berks community might consider. Why not create a permanent management resource center for the city and county? We envision a group that could conduct studies for either government, or work with committees the city and county would create. But it shouldn't belong to either the city or county.

Why? As valuable as business-led advisory groups are, they tend to be ad hoc - here today, gone tomorrow. But the developing science of reinvented government in America needs serious, long-term attention, specifically applied to each kind of city or county.

A management resource center could act as an ongoing conduit to bring state-of-the-art methodologies and techniques into Berks County. It could create a talent bank - of persons in business, the universities and other walks of life - that is ready and able to help out government departments. It could survey other city and county governments, in Pennsylvania and outside, and establish some performance indicators - benchmarks of good performance - for local government.

With the performance indicators and benchmarks it created, city and county government departments would have realistic targets to shoot for. And residents, for the first time, would have a pretty good idea of how their governments, compared with others, are stacking up.

We'd suggest the Berks County Community Foundation take the lead role in establishing the management resource center, lining up a wide array of local supporters so the operation wouldn't seem subservient to any group or faction. The community foundation has provided support for this report, which may cloud our objectivity.

But for years we've been writing about the immense need for strong community foundations, not just to channel donors funds and support worthy local charities, but to support forums, roundtables and citizen-based planning groups. The foundations would think in big-picture, strategic terms about their areas' futures, and help their regions function more effectively. Organizing and helping to sustain a management resource center would be just such an activity.

The management resource center would need a board to guide its activities. The ideal board, we'd suggest, would have a close tie to local government and a certain measure of independence to assure objectivity and freedom from political control. Each elected



official of the city and the county might be invited, for example, to appoint a business person or other citizen to a board of directors for the management resource center. But the center board, in turn, would be free to choose its own chair and director, and to add other advisers and participants from the community. The center would be designed as government's friend, but would not be dependent upon it.

The Berks County Chamber of Commerce should clearly be a partner in this effort. But since the bulk of its members are from smaller and medium-sized businesses, we believe it would also be extremely important to include on the center board several chief executives or chief operating officers of some of the major corporations functioning in the county.

We're thinking of companies such as Carpenter Technology Corp., Arrow International, VF Corp. and CoreStates (Meridian) and Sovereign banks. Indeed, the top corporate leaders are already organized in a group they call the Berks Business Executives Forum. It originally was organized by Samuel A. McCullough, then Meridian chairman, president and chief executive officer, to focus on the larger corporations' role in the Berks community.

Why have the corporate heavyweights involved? First, they and their organizations have an enormous amount of management expertise that can and should be channeled to local government. Second, in times when national and global trends often preoccupy corporations, this process should encourage big firms to be actively engaged in the Berks community. This is important for big companies because local government efficiency and quality of life make a big difference for their employees and operations. Finally, the big corporations' very presence on the board would help balance the occasional political pressures to back off a government reinvention agenda.

On the other hand, including small-business folks, people from the neighborhoods and youth representatives would keep the focus of the management resource center on such basic issues as street maintenance, park maintenance, fire protection and community policing.

Some unusual talent might be tapped - retirees with strong management experience, for example. Yet the whole exercise should also improve citizen literacy about government's operations, and the very real challenges it faces.

Would the activities of such a center overlap those of the Pennsylvania Economy League, known for its tax analysis and government efficiency agendas? The answer is "Yes" - and perhaps a Berks management resource center should have a loose affiliation with the league. But, we believe, it should have an independent identity - raising Berks to state and national attention as the first community anywhere to set up

this kind of hybrid public-private effort. This landmark center would draw full business and citizen talent, in partnership with government, to improve government's performance.

## **WHAT YOU SHOULD EXPECT OF A TRULY REINVENTED GOVERNMENT**

A thinning of bureaucratic ranks without reduction of basic services. Development of personnel systems designed to tap employees' talents, but not keep them on the payroll for life if they aren't producing. A government with offices and divisions free to carry out their service responsibilities the way they think best- with the expectation they'll then be held, corporate-style, strictly accountable for the results.

Development of a bidding system that allows government to contract out services to private providers as long as the government's own workers are given a fair chance to bid for the same business. (In Philadelphia, Indianapolis and other cities that have experimented a lot with privatization, it turns out that government divisions and their employees very often shake up their operations, find economies, and win the competition with private operators. Indeed, in some cases the successful bidders are the unions themselves.)

Lowering of taxes, including such innovations as user fees to switch payment for services from the general public to the precise users who benefit directly from them. Based on his past performance, we suspect these are the values Stephen Bonczek, the new city manager, will be anxious to introduce into Reading government.

But it's unrealistic to think any new city administration, without heavyweight support from outside, can achieve the fundamental shifts that are needed.

## **FOR RESULTS, MEASURE AS YOU GO**

Patronage and favors. Who's in? Who's out? How did someone's aunt or nephew get a cushy government job? Which government functionaries are getting paid how much? Where are the petty scandals? Who is becoming ensnared in the big ones?

Such questions - remnants of a history of raw patronage politics - are fodder for the stories that Pennsylvania print and broadcast media milk to a fare-thee-well. For raw patronage politics surviving into the dying gasps of the 20th century, Pennsylvania may be the lead state among all states. The system is deeply ingrained.

But couldn't one add some crisp accountability - not just accountability for not stealing from the public till, but for actually doing one's job well?

Lots of government workers, in fact, already try to do their best. Often the problem is not the people, it's the system. That would include a lack of training in advanced techniques and an inability to deal properly with the public.

Still, until government employees are recognized and rewarded for good performance and disciplined for bad performance, things can't get better.

A lot of the attention must go to leading executives appointed by city and county government. For many of these people, it's time to think of actual pay for performance. To our mind, that means cash bonuses when they - and the management teams they assemble around them - reach or exceed a set of demanding performance goals.

Some people may grouse, complaining that just means more money for government employees. We disagree. The total costs in pay for performance, even if some executives occasionally see their compensation doubled, will be small change compared with the hidden costs of leaving agencies to drift.

What's more, the use of publicly disclosed pay for performance standards works two ways. It provides inducements for high performance, and undergirds the position of able incumbents. It would not be as easy to fire these employees over some minor political squabble or to remove them in favor of a political crony. Conversely, if the employees do poorly, the crony-based system can't protect them as easily. Indeed, it becomes easier to show poor performers to the door.

Which kinds of persons are candidates for pay for performance? We'd start with those responsible for major functions, such as schools, the airport, community development and emergency communications center.

Who would set the standards for extra pay? Clearly, it should be the boards of their agencies. They're the counterparts to a board of directors that holds corporate management responsible.

We would suggest that a new management resource center (an idea outlined in these articles), could advise on guidelines for reliable performance measures, and eventually report to the people of the region on the quality and adequacy of the standards the boards set.

There are some mine fields here - councils or commissioners who prefer to micro-manage and manipulate, a politics-as-usual mindset, agency fear, results materializing

too slowly, lack of leadership, a bored or angry press.

But smart corporations have overcome parallel perils. Governments have to learn to be smart, too, or everyone will suffer.

How about subordinates of top agency leaders? Wherever possible, their compensation should be pegged to performance, too. In government, as in private business, sports, the arts - virtually any field - it takes a team to turn in quality performance. Any successful chief executive will tell you that.

Should pay for performance also apply to rank-and-file workers? Our answer is no - and yes. It's hardly fair to ask a subordinate to be responsible for the overall accomplishment of his or her agency. But it is possible to define pay for performance in a more targeted way. An individual employee's skills, attitudes and ability to accomplish tasks can be measured, and pay and promotions should be directly related. Every worker outside of government is treated that way, and the system is seen as fair enough. So why not accountability for government workers?

A performance-based culture actually honors the front-line worker. It means he or she must be trained, given skills, become more competent, be considered a team member and looked to for ideas. It means a switch from organizational politics to problem solving. It means supervisors must desert the old command-and-control management style, switching focus to performance-based results. And it means a unity among supervisors and workers who look out for the agency's customers, the citizens.

In this process, one has to jettison the old-style way of judging governmental performance by how much money or effort gets invested in some project. Instead, it's necessary to look at results. Not inputs, but outputs. Not how many dollars get spent on a youngster's school, for example, but how well he or she reads at the end of the year.

The dollars are important, of course, but only in light of what they actually produce. The better the performance measurement, the greater the savings can be.

Targets, for example, need to be set around things citizens care about - whether the police show up within minutes of a distress call; whether the grass is mowed, flowers tended, playgrounds maintained in the parks; whether the potholes are fixed before they can alter the wheel alignment of a lot of cars; how long it takes to get a pothole fixed.

The system gets more complex when it's applied to city services that involve more steps and more people, such as the time it takes to get a development permit approved, or the turnover time in making a house that has fallen onto the tax-forfeiture rolls available for the market. What's critical is that goals do get set. The message to the

people heading government offices needs to be: Find a way. Get that time reduced to its practical minimum. Trim costs. Make government work for the citizen as smoothly as a competitive firm works to hold its customers.

Here are five public officials in Berks County who might be placed on pay-for-performance contracts. The objectives listed are hypothetical.

John C. Reinhart

Salary: \$61,000

Possible objectives:

- Ability to operate airport in the black

- Ability to attract and oversee federal and state project grants

- Urge and monitor general improvements in freight and passenger traffic

Ronald E. Miller

Salary: \$53,000.

Possible objectives:

- More investment in challenged neighborhoods for removal of slum conditions and blight

- Revamp codes enforcement policies and procedures

- Spread economic development loans among more businesses

Dr. James C. Goodhart

Salary: \$110,000

Possible objectives:

- Decrease dropout rate

- Increase number of schools serving as community centers

- Downsize administration by one-third

Craig S. Breneiser

Salary: \$43,171

Possible objectives:

- Reduce overtime for dispatchers

- Increase number of police departments that use communications center

- Monitor response time for police, fire, ambulance calls

Lee T. Fredericks

Salary: \$97,000

Possible objectives:

- Raise average SAT scores of seniors

- Decrease dropout rate

- Boost district technology plan

## **READING'S PLIGHT: TIME TO FIGHT BACK**

For Reading to return to fiscal sanity, the Berks County government must take over those services that are truly regional in scope.

Once Reading takes reinvention seriously, moving to professionalize operations and stop wasting money, the people of Berks County and the rest of Pennsylvania will owe it a better - a fair - break.

No community, anywhere in America, should be asked or expected to labor under the incredible tax burden -10 times the average in other Berks municipalities - that Reading citizens and businesses now bear. Some families, the elderly among them, are in danger of losing their lifetime savings and being driven from their homes.

This is the type of gross inequity, of terrible unfairness, that ought to be impossible in modern America. It's a violation of a basic social compact.

Can anything be done? Everyone we asked gave a single reply: Berks' other municipalities will never help Reading voluntarily. And from the point of view of immediate self-interest, why should they? In some of the suburbs, the only serious costs are snow removal in winter and keeping the roads paved in summer.

The outlying communities can avail themselves of every city-based service, from cultural events to specialized library research to sports facilities, on a fee-for-service basis, and never pay the imbedded costs. City-based poverty and the burden of state-imposed mandates a city like Reading must bear can be written off as someone else's problem.

In truth, it's not someone else's problem. The chief executive officer of one of the largest corporations in Berks County told us: " If Berks could be seen as a barrel of apples, throw a bad one in and good ones don't make it better. Reading's problem will get big and bad enough to affect issues of government, crime and taxation. It will erode the quality of people available for us to hire. It will cast doubt on our willingness to expand here. The seeds of problems planted in downtown Reading will have had immense impact."

But don't, everyone told us, look to the Pennsylvania Legislature for substantial relief. The state invented the system of massive property-tax reliance in the first place, and there are no signs it's ready to change it.

There may be a glimmer of hope here. The Pennsylvania League of Cities and Municipalities is readying a major push in the state Legislature to let counties - if they so

choose - add another penny to the local sales tax. The new revenue would be shared with localities on a needs-based formula recognizing the heaviness of the tax burden, and the weight of tax-exempt properties, each is bearing.

For Berks County and Reading, this might be a pretty good deal because the sales tax exempts food and clothing while hitting many outsiders who come to shop at the outlet malls. A similar, optional piggyback tax was approved for Allegheny County and is already helping Pittsburgh materially. It wouldn't come close to relieving the discrimination against the city of Reading, but it would be a start.

Other legislation pending in Harrisburg would let any city or municipality substitute a local income tax for the property tax. But even if that measure got passed, there would be no relief in the form of revenue transfers across city/township lines.

One scenario is to persuade the county government to take over more and more city services that really serve a countywide market. In a sense, that's already begun. Six years ago, the county took over responsibility for Reading Area Community College, previously the responsibility of the Reading School District. Five years ago, the county gave \$5 million to create an endowment for the Reading Public Museum, and now does most maintenance and grounds work for the museum as well. There are ongoing negotiations, with a hand from Berks County Conservancy, to buy the city's land on Neversink Mountain.

Pending, at this writing, is county agreement to support the proposed downtown civic center with a hotel/motel tax. The county could take over Reading Municipal Stadium, home of the regionally beloved Reading Phillies, which drains the city treasury by \$120,000 a year. The city water authority and sewers ought to be handled regionally.

The same applies to the Reading Public Library, another truly regional facility, which costs the city some \$900,000 a year. Yet, when a library merger was proposed last year, a field day of parochial knee-jerking ensued. Some City Council people didn't want to give up their library. And local librarians across the county (mostly funded by local contributions, like volunteer firefighters) objected lustily to being swallowed up in a countywide system.

It's obvious that all the services of regional impact ought to be bundled together and then bought from the city or transferred to the county. We know some people will ask: Do you really mean the county, considering its gross fiscal mismanagement of the last year? Our reply: There's no excusing that mismanagement. Surely it is time to prepare for county charter reform with a fully accountable county manager in charge of day-to-day operations. What's needed is a general-purpose government for the county. It may take a few years to achieve, but it's indispensable.

What's clearly untenable for the long haul is leaving major responsibilities for issues that are truly regional at the township and borough level. Grass-roots sentiment is very important, and needs to be heard. A county charter might even include mandatory features to assure that people in neighborhoods and townships have an opportunity to comment on spending, infrastructure and other decisions affecting them.

But leave absolute power over such issues as land use and taxes in the hands of mini-governments - the present formula - and what do you have? Lots of local democracy, of course. But localism does nothing to protect citizens against fiscal mismanagement and corruption. Indeed, malfeasance can be worse at the local level, with amateurs handling significant sums of money.

Finally, mini-government swallows the common good. In the 21st century, it will be a sure recipe for bitter discord, social division and economic decline in the county.

The peril of governmental status quo is one reason why, in our "Bright Berks" scenario, we called for getting the county's youth involved, asking the adult establishment the hard, relevant questions about the future. They would want to know, for example, why the establishment is not acting, now, to create a Berks County in which people will want to live during the 21st century.

Even reformed government and regionalization of services, however, won't solve all of Reading's problems. The city's overload of declined property values, of sheer poverty, is simply too great for the city to prosper without a fundamental change in Pennsylvania state laws.

That means it may be time to go to court, asking the judiciary to force the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to create a more equitable system. The 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution requires states to grant citizens "equal protection of the laws." But who can reasonably argue the citizens of Reading are receiving such protection when they are required to pay 10 times as much in local property taxes as other residents of Berks County?

It's likely such a case would fail. In applying the 14th Amendment, the courts have set up multiple barriers. For example, it's necessary to define a clear class of wronged persons - generally by race or sex - and then to show the discrimination was intentional.

But a powerful court brief could be constructed on the basis of the terrible quandary in which Reading taxpayers now find themselves and the responsibility of the state to provide relief to its citizens. The process of getting a case planned could be a powerful catalyst to assemble coalitions, to throw a klieg light of public attention onto the problem.



Why not form a " legal hit squad" of the people most affected? The obvious base would be homeowners and businesses that are directly affected - and afflicted - by the city's property tax rate. One could reasonably include, too, members of Latino and black and poor white communities who are forced to pay higher rents because of the taxes their landlords pay. Anyone living or doing business in Reading could, in fact, be seen as an aggrieved party.

The concerned corporations and law firms of Reading and Berks County could be asked to lend legal talent. Public interest lawyers expert in Pennsylvania state law might be rounded up from Harrisburg, Philadelphia or Pittsburgh. And the whole group might look into multiple strategies.

Who'd be responsible, for example, if the government of Reading would shut down? Yes, we said shut down. Why should a city have to stay in business if state policies force it against the wall? Yet, if Reading did renounce its charter, who'd be responsible for it - the county or the commonwealth itself? The questions may sound dire - but so is Reading's fiscal plight.

There's a related question of inequality in what gets spent, per pupil, in Berks County's 18 public school districts. The high is \$9,898 in Schuylkill Valley, the low is \$6,416 in Reading. It's true, for the money it has, Reading gets much better educational quality than many other urban school districts. (We were especially impressed by the high marks so many of our interviewees gave to Reading High School, even though some said it had been stronger in the past. Special concerns were voiced about the city's middle schools.)

But Wyomissing, next door to Reading, spends \$9,606 per pupil per year, about \$3,000 more than Reading. In a classroom of 30 children, that works out to \$90,000 a year. Just ask any Reading principal or teacher what he or she might be able to achieve with those kinds of resources.

One has to think, for example, of Gordon Hoodak, principal of the Lauer's Park Elementary School in Reading's impoverished Sixth Ward. This is an area with mostly splintered families and a stunning turnover rate as students move in and out. Nevertheless, Lauer's Park students have one of the highest attendance rates in Berks County. Hoodak achieves his seeming miracles with endless creativity, but zero extra cash.

His example puts mediocre schools, whether city or suburban, to shame. Leaders of his caliber are extremely rare, of course. They certainly are no excuse for grossly underfunding schools in poor districts. But they do prove how criminal it is to write off poor kids and starve their schools for basic resources.

Overall in Pennsylvania, per pupil spending ranges from approximately \$4,000 a year in some of the poorest rural areas to more than \$12,000 a year in the richest suburbs of Philadelphia. In states across the country, poor districts have gone to court and won relief. In Kentucky, in fact, a court order created a radically reformed system now considered a national model for schools that are both effective and equitable.

In the early '90s, a lawsuit was filed by more than 100 of Pennsylvania's poorest districts. So far, the state court system has failed to respond. Perhaps a fresh or differently framed case out of Berks County could break the logjam.

If slavery could be abolished, if voting rights could be expanded to all Americans, if a Berlin Wall and Soviet Empire could fall, then gross discrimination against the people of Pennsylvania's cities and poorest rural areas can one day be overturned, too. But without constant agitation, the day of reform can be delayed for decade after decade. The plight of Reading today shows the profound cost of delay.

## **NEIGHBORHOOD MESSAGE: BERKS COUNTY, HEAR US!**

Inner-city volunteers fight to save the crumbling core of Reading and often wonder if anyone cares.

They work in quiet anonymity, winter and summer, year-in, year-out, in troubled inner-city neighborhoods. If they're paid, it's not much. They come face-to-face with some of society's most intractable problems, from feuding families to drugs to gangs to long-term joblessness and despair. On occasion they risk their own personal safety. They can be called social surrogates for everyone in Berks County.

We refer to the leaders and staffs of the small organizations working tirelessly to rehabilitate housing, launch youth-training programs, prevent violence, hold families together in poor areas of Reading. Some are in the clergy, others simply neighborhood folks with the strength and character to reach out to and support the people who live around them.

All of these people are on the front lines, staving off the collapse of the region's vital center. But they are lonely; they wonder who stands behind them.

They tell an alarming story of neglect of Reading's oldest neighborhoods, with run-down property, absentee landlords and painfully slow city government response.

One leader related concerns about untended tanks of a gasoline station vacated for more than a year. "They (city officials) always take your phone calls," she said, "but the

tanks are still there. And if a fire came, all these houses would go."

Another neighborhood leader volunteered the case of a burned-out building that's an obvious hazard to the kids in the neighborhood. "You'd think that building would be demolished," he said. "But it's still there."

The deepest resentment is reserved for the deep disparity in taxes city people must pay, in contrast to suburbanites. As one of the ministers in Reading told us: "I bought a house in the 1980s for \$40,000. I've stayed here, kept my kids in the public schools. Now my taxes have gone from \$800 to \$3,000. The clear message is that it's cheaper to leave Reading."

The fountain of frustration falls beyond government, reaching local foundations, corporate funders and other contributors. Some of the neighborhood folks find the funders slow to take on any new entity, fearful to risk a possible shift in power.

Meridian Bank, caught in the asset-shedding stages of an impending merger, generated hostility when it closed the heavily used branch in a low-income neighborhood. Calls were made, we were told, "but no one wanted to hear that we needed a bank. It closed in November. It's gone."

(To Meridian's credit, it later decided to give the building to the Reading School District, to be renovated for a new elementary school.)

A minister active in community development recalls proposing a building project, but encountering zero cooperation on a mortgage. "Banks," said one neighborhood leader, "talk about their responsibilities under the Community Reinvestment Act, but they really just want to donate a meal."

When discussion turned to the Reading Eagle and Reading Times, the region's primary newspapers, neighborhood activists delivered a nearly unanimous chorus of criticism, beginning with their belief that crimes or other negative developments in Reading "get blown all out of proportion because it sells newspapers."

For example, one neighborhood activist complained "One day we had people risking their lives to take on the drug culture in the neighborhood, and the lead story in the next day's paper was a Frisbee contest."

Another remembered: "When the hurricane hit Florida, we took two buses full of kids to Homestead. They gave up their holiday vacation to build homes for poor people. Ninety kids went. We got four lines in the paper's religion section. If one of those kids had shoplifted something, it would have been a big story." (In fairness, the newspaper had

actually sent a reporter on a similar trip shortly beforehand, providing full coverage. It also published a picture page of the trip in question after the participants returned home. Nonetheless, the sentiment appears to be serious and runs deep among neighborhood leaders.)

A nonprofit executive remembers amassing \$300,000 and rehabilitating some inner city housing under very tough conditions: "It turned around the whole corner of the neighborhood," the executive said. "But not a line of coverage. Not even a picture."

Not all Reading neighborhood leaders view the local press quite so darkly. Some are prepared to advise others about the tough competition for newspaper space, and the need to be relentless in pushing one's story.

But, as visitors, we were thunderstruck by the bitterness (justified or not) with which a number of activist leaders of the center city view the community's major news outlet.

The division, we might point out, is hardly unique to Reading. We heard similar sentiments, for example, in our interviews for a report we prepared for the St. Paul Pioneer-Press in Minnesota. A steady torrent of negative news in the media was reinforcing, for inner city people, their suspicion that the system doesn't really care what happens to them or their neighborhoods.

Without suppressing legitimate news, we suggested in our St. Paul report, more balance could be found. Both local television and the local press, for example, could be on the watch for more stories about neighborhood people making it against sometimes immense odds.

We also suggested the local paper could strengthen its ties to the neighborhoods through a more extensive stringer network. We said it might focus on developing news sources in neighborhoods, just as it does in government or business. And that the paper might offer technical assistance to neighborhood or minority newspapers - conceivably even making contact with budding young journalists it might consider for its own staff later on.

Similar ideas might work in Berks County. Long-term goals really ought to be the same – committed activists whose mission it is to revitalize the urban soul of the Reading region, and a newspaper with a direct economic stake in a resilient city.

## **BERKSNET AND BEYOND**

Berks County can herald its many assets by developing a strong presence in cyberspace

In the world now dawning, the community that's not on the Internet will be akin to the city that says no to telephone service. The good news is that Berks County has made a modest start through its BerksNet, an Internet gateway and developing information service on what's happening in the county.

The information ranges from outlets to restaurants, government services to job openings.

BerksNet has good graphics and presentation, but the information is still embryonic (names of restaurants, for example, but no information - and certainly no reviews - about them). A couple of imaginative elements have appeared - SAT scores and dropout rates for various school districts in the county, for example.

The question is, can this work-in-progress, backed by the business community chiefly to make sure industrial locators can find Berks, be turned into something more? Can it become a positive, long-term asset - a broad-gauged instrument for Berks County's economic, educational and social development?

We think so, but not until the partnership that started it up - Montgomery & Partners, Inc., and Weidenhammer Systems Corp. - gets some help.

There is ample talent in Berks County to turn BerksNet into a powerful tool for the community. We suggest organizing a BerksNet Development Committee in one of the area's colleges and universities, or even better, as a joint activity of Penn State, Kutztown, Alvernia, Albright and Reading Area Community College. These institutions already are joined together in a Higher Education Council of Berks County.

Form a group of entrepreneurial, intellectually curious faculty who are willing to put some time into the project, and the product could be a body of high-quality, on-line information sources - and even more, a set of tools for robust community growth.

A school of business, for example, might work to get full data sets (including projections of future directions and employment needs) from local firms. Students in the food services industry might get to work enriching the restaurant reviews. Academics interested in historic preservation might prepare perceptive and entertaining descriptions of important sites in Berks history - urban and rural. Agricultural scientists could prepare a full profile of Berks farming development and current strengths.

Conservationists could catalogue, with maps, farmlands and open spaces the county plan indicates for preservation.

It takes little imagination to see hundreds of areas for BerksNet enrichment, from entertaining bed-and-breakfast listings to reviews of upcoming plays and concerts, from in-depth evaluation of college programs to forums on entrepreneurial opportunities for minorities and women.

Clearly, Berks County schools could be active participants with their own pages under BerksNet. Perhaps the pages could even become showcases of some of the students' best writing or paintings. Musical compositions could be made available to Internet users through on-line sound clips.

The goal, of course, should be to make Berks students as Internet literate as any in America or the world. And if there's early and sustained effort to expand Internet access, with the necessary computer lines and equipment, into low-income areas, city or rural, the information highway can begin to function as a great social and economic equalizer, too.

BerksNet could also be a powerful tool to democratize the debate about the future of Berks County. Why not, through the colleges and universities - or perhaps with a hand from the Berks Coalition for a Healthy Community - develop a set of indicators showing where the county stands today, and then trend-line the indicators to show where it's headed?

Sustainable Seattle was a pioneer in putting its indicators on the World Wide Web. Getting everyone on the same (Web) page is a powerful way to break the veil of confusion and misinformation that too often swirls around regional decisions.

We see the Web as a powerful tool to inform, empower and activate citizens, leading to levels of informed debate and regional cohesion it might otherwise take decades to develop.

And we believe the Reading Eagle and Reading Times, rather than being a competitor of BerksNet, might become a collaborator and ally. A great deal of the regular data on events in Berks, routinely printed in the paper, could go on-line (with credit), inviting keyword searches (and advertising, legitimately, the papers' contribution).

More critically, the paper could collaborate in gathering the data for the key regional indicators shown on BerksNet, and then complement the effort by major analytical articles and editorials. The indicators, and the areas they cover, will have been defined in part by broad-scale citizen participation in the Berks community, coordinated (we

would hope) by the universities. As the Eagle and Times then picked up on those themes, it would be empowering its own readers to influence the focus of its most serious coverage. The mutual gains - from citizens to BerksNet to the universities to the newspaper itself - could be great.

## **ON-LINE ASSETS**

Citizens in 37 Vermont and New Hampshire communities along the upper Connecticut River Valley designed an imaginative set of indicators for their shared region. It's called Valley VitalSigns. Similar measures, we guess, would emerge in a Berks study, too. Here are some of the vital signs:

The number of working farms.

The percentage of businesses that are locally owned.

The percentage of people who volunteer.

The number of local children who grow up and settle in the area.

The distance from the center of each community to a place where an unobstructed field of stars could be viewed.

The New Englanders got their idea to monitor regional trends from a project called Sustainable Seattle, which has measures covering the environment, population and resources, economy, youth and education, health and community. Seattle-area citizens can go on the Internet to see what's happening on each of those fronts across their region - learning, for example, that while total waste disposal has decreased due to recycling efforts in recent years, the percentage of children living in poverty has actually been rising.

## **GROWTH: GOOD FOR BERKS? HOW TO HANDLE IT.**

The winter sun afforded little light on a gray January day, and a thick blanket of 1996's record snow concealed most of Berks County's natural treasures.

You might think there wasn't much to see from the window of the small plane that brought us to Berks for several days of interviews.

But, it was clear enough to view the contours of Berks' legendary fertile fields, almost surrounded by mountains from which a dense coat of trees thrust up from the snow. Small communities came into view, many nestled tightly along the winding Schuylkill River. Kutztown, with its university towers; Boyertown; Oley; Hamburg; Birdsboro; Robesonia presented classic American town views. The recurring scenes before us

were reminiscent of the region's rich history of serious farming interspersed with heavy industry beside almost every town.

Even the largest community, Reading, was a picture-book sight of a traditional small American city, tucked in between Mount Penn and the river, with its grid-pattern streets giving order to homes and stores and factories.

What was missing was a sight that's become so pervasive since the booming American 1980s - massive outcroppings of suburban development, set apart from the old town grids and typically providing just one or two connections to existing major highways. These are new settlements, where people move in and find themselves so removed from existing community stores, schools and gas stations that all these facilities must be built again.

There surely is new development in Berks County. Many people told us the conglomeration of office/commercial/residential development in Spring Ridge and adjacent Wyomissing has begun to form a new core of Berks County, eclipsing Reading proper. The irony is that Reading's sewer moratorium is driving development even farther out, to such places as Exeter Township and Sinking Spring.

Still, compared with so many other parts of America, Berks County is experiencing only the earliest wave of serious growth. Up to now it's been manageable. And while many people moving out to new subdivisions say they wouldn't consider living in the city, there's little sign so far of the extremes of separateness - gated communities, the enclave developments where the exclusive fearful wall themselves off behind gates and guards.

So, the good news is that the future in Berks County is not buried by the present. The people who live here still have choices to make about the appearance and character of this beautiful countryside of field, pasture, woods and mountains. They have choices to make about the future of the county's constellation of historic cities, towns and boroughs.

But make no mistake, the status quo, the way things are today, is not sustainable. The secret is out. This is a great place to live. As surely as the sky sometimes signals the coming rain, growth is headed to Berks County. It's coming up the Schuylkill Valley from Philadelphia, over from Allentown in a sort of echo effect of New York City's growth pressure from the east. The choices the people of Berks make in handling that growth will determine the quality of this region's future for generations to come.

We think the choice is clear: Unless the Berks County community comes to a consensus to control and guide the new growth its way, the same big subdivision,



depersonalized development pattern most of America has been pursuing will triumph here too, consuming the region's assets, homogenizing and concreting its landscape, disconnecting its citizens, erasing its special identity.

Even in advance of a major development wave, 75,000 acres of Berks County farmland have yielded to the bulldozer since the 1950s. Berks does have a laudable farmland preservation plan, which has succeeded in saving more than 50 farms totaling more than 5,000 acres. But the fight to preserve agriculture - Berks' #1 industry - is a tough one.

With suburbia's encroachment, conflicts emerge. When farmers need to be out spreading manure or spraying herbicides, suburbanites may want to have picnics. And then there's big-lot zoning - one house on many acres - which sounds conservationist, but ends up in farmland loss, most of the land going back to forest. (" We worked so hard to clear the original Penn's woods; it's a shame to send it back to trees," a leader of the farm preservation effort told us.)

But the biggest peril of all is standard American suburban development. Without a concerted push, huge proportions of Berks farmlands and open spaces will be fed to the most consumptive form of development imaginable.

Tom Hylton, an author who grew up in Reading and still lives in Pottstown, describes this latter 20th-century American form as one " that randomly scatters homes, offices, and stores all over the landscape. In this living pattern, the only way to get anywhere is by private automobile.

This low-density way of life . . . has consumed millions of acres of farmland and open space, degraded the environment, raised everyone's cost of living, robbed children and the elderly of their independence, and isolated the poor in the cities, where many neighborhoods are decayed and dangerous."

But wait a minute. Isn't that showing a lot of irreverence for the American dream? Don't millions of us yearn for that log cabin in the woods, that nice house on the largest lot you can afford, with a broad expanse of lawn for the kids to play on? No matter if the drive's longer, or that the kids need to be ferried everywhere. Gas is cheap, and families already have a couple of cars. They're used to the payments.

But there's trouble today with the American dream - if that's it. Coast to coast, Americans complain with increasing bitterness of how terrible the traffic has become. They know things won't get better any time soon. Indeed, they suspect gridlock will spoil a lot of their lives. They see property tax bills growing faster than family income - an inevitability because new development doesn't, in fact, pay for itself. They find the

distances in their lives - from both parents' workplaces to home, to school, to shop - getting progressively longer. They see more and more of their income going to autos. And they read that real estate has lost its gloss. Indeed, they know the suburban house is no longer gaining value the way it used to.

In some states and regions where people have actually lived for years with standard American sprawl, there are signs of disillusionment. Market demand is building, for example, for townhouses close to shopping and employment, with walking paths and bus stops.

The most rapidly spreading innovation in housing is a return to tradition - to the way towns and pre-World War II suburbs were built. Instead of houses on lots with huge setbacks, the trend seems to be toward smaller lot sizes, porches on the front of houses, cars in the back with garages off alleys.

People are asking for sidewalks again - and wide enough to walk on, if you please. Instead of subdivision streets wide enough to land a plane on, they're asking for streets narrow enough to slow down cars, to create walkable environments. In Austin, Texas, people are now talking about the popsicle test & ; the measure of a good community in which a child need walk no more than five minutes to buy a popsicle.

And, while some Americans retreat fearfully into gated communities, others are expressing disgust with the dull, one-class, one-price subdivision cul-de-sac. They're interested, instead, in communities in which their parents or less affluent children might afford a place to live, settings with common space that makes it easier to get to know neighbors.

This way of living served reasonably well for centuries, so it's more a rediscovery than an innovation. But, in Berks County, as elsewhere, developers who sense that the traditional forms make sense, and have a market waiting, can't build that way because of restrictions on density and codes requiring big setbacks and big streets. Building communities such as our parents and grandparents enjoyed is against the law. Zoning ordinances stand squarely in the way of returning to the genuinely traditional way of building new communities.

In Cumru Township, for example, cluster housing is permitted in agricultural and low density residential zones, but 70 percent of any tract must be set aside as open space.

In Amity Township, home construction is allowed in low-density residential areas - primarily fields without public sewer and water - but the minimum lot size must be 80,000 square feet. Further, developers of any tracts must include 33-foot-wide streets.

How can more compact, land-conserving development be encouraged? We could cite efforts in communities across America, but here in Berks County one needs only to look slightly south to Lancaster County. When Lancaster County came up in our conversations with Berks citizens, the quick reference was often one of horror about its unacceptable traffic levels.

What's missed is the exciting record of what Lancaster County - belatedly, but now with conviction and clarity - has done in response to its growth pressures. Lancaster's pace of growth picked up dramatically in the 1980s, driven by the wave of commuters that had already washed over Chester County, people willing to drive longer distances for better land and housing at lower prices.

Lancaster in the '80s was a cauldron of conflict between the forces of expansion (" Let's get bigger and more powerful" ) and the forces of exclusion (" We've got a good thing, and we should protect it from others" ).

In 1988, the Lancaster New Era published a series decrying sprawl, rapid development and farmland loss, calling the region " The (Ex?) Garden Spot of America."

The series had striking impact on citizens, laying the seeds for two ensuing years of debate about ways to channel growth so that the county's unique character would not be destroyed. The people of Lancaster County, already alarmed by the rate of growth, the rate of traffic and disappearance of farmland, responded with extraordinary support for what became Lancaster's new county comprehensive plan, formally adopted in 1991.

The signature achievement of the new plan was a commitment to urban growth boundaries, actually drawing lines around each community in the county, designating where expansion will be accommodated - and where it won't. The countywide vision in the policy plan makes it clear: " The kind of community envisioned for the future Lancaster County is based on its historic pattern of settlement."

Yet, if that sounds like progress, you need to remember the Pennsylvania structure, in which county governments have only limited regulatory authority. Local governments - cities, townships and boroughs - can fall in line, or, if they choose, ignore the county's plan. They can also ignore the wishes and well-being of neighboring communities - putting a solid waste dump beside the next town's parkland, for example. If localities care to support a county plan, they need to review and change many of their zoning regulations.

Fortunately for Lancaster County citizens, the 20 most populous communities have already adopted the growth boundary strategy. And, riding a resurgent interest in

preserving farmland, the county on March 22 was able to celebrate the achievement of the 20,000th acre of protected farmland. The turnaround is remarkable: Only two years ago, Lancaster was cited the fourth most threatened region by the American Farmland Trust.

Like the Lancaster New Era, the Reading Eagle and Reading Times could perform a historic mission for Berks County by championing the idea that vibrant and strong cities are essential to a shared future, that sprawl is ugly, and that all citizens of the county need to be vigilant in protecting its future.

Another key to good land use is getting road decisions made in a synchronized manner. Everybody recognizes the failure to do this. Lancaster County residents remember the infamous "goat path," where a four-lane highway was started, complete with ramps and overpasses & ; and then abandoned by the state, covered with dirt, and leased out to area farmers. And who needs to remind anyone in Berks County about imperiled road projects.

The historic development pattern of postwar America has seen roads chasing new houses and businesses wherever they go. Put in a new subdivision, and the roads will come. If they're not wide enough, they'll add lanes. If they're not safe enough, shoulders come next. Those days are dead. As one Pennsylvania pundit put it recently, those visions died on Heartbreak Ridge, an obvious reference to the governor's painful acknowledgment that available state monies are running leagues behind demand for road improvements in Berks County.

Transportation planners pore over the Berks County road dilemmas and come away shaking their heads. One in a position to know all the options told us: "We've become the capital of roads to nowhere. And there's no way we're going to build our way out of the pattern we have here."

On the other hand, the bus service already in place - BARTA - is really quite remarkable, if strained increasingly by underfunding. Its 60 large coaches committed to regular routes and its 35 smaller vehicles for door-to-door service provide many citizens with an alternative to getting out in that traffic every day. That 75 percent of BARTA operating costs are funded by fares is a tribute both to riders seeing value for money and to a high standard of efficient operation.

What's lacking in Berks is a firm commitment to coordinate the approval of every new development with access to transit. If you want more people to ride rather than drive, you have to make that choice convenient. Such arrangements are never accidental, but the result of aggressive efforts to channel new development along corridors where transit service is financially sustainable.

Even non-transit riders have a major stake in service being launched, and working well. As a rule, each transit rider means one less private auto competing for space on the roads.

Far reaching as they seem - perhaps farfetched to some - these ideas are not late-arrivers here. Indeed, the very first transportation objective in the Berks County Comprehensive Plan for 2010 suggests the critical importance of coordinating land-use development and transportation infrastructure.

In fact, the principles and objectives laid out in the Berks County plan are as good a blueprint to follow as one could find. The land-use section urges that municipalities " direct new development to areas adjacent to existing development, with adequate sewer and transportation capacities," and discourages development where infrastructure is not adequate. The plan is direct and clear about minimizing urban-rural land conflicts and preserving agricultural land, forested land, steep slopes and wetlands.

As county plans go, this one is good. But under Pennsylvania law, it's only one voice. It has no teeth - unless the people of a county are determined it will be respected.

In our visit, we listened carefully to dozens of you, about your worries and your dreams. The Pennsylvania German traditions of thrift and practicality still come through. Your worries about the affordability of the future, about the quality of life deteriorating, about squandering your best assets on the altar of unmanaged growth - those came through, too.

Maybe you should regard the principles of your county plan as Moses did his. He did not, you'll recall, descend from that mountain with the " 10 suggestions." Berks County citizens, as the crunch of growth comes, need a near-religious commitment to the standards they'll hold sacred.

## **READING CAN RIDE RAILROAD PAST INTO FUTURE**

Restoring direct rail service to Philadelphia - a re-creation of service along the Reading Co.'s traditional lines - is Berks County's most exciting transit possibility today. The right-of-way is largely intact and generous in size, having once accommodated four tracks, two each for the old Pennsylvania and Reading lines. It's expected a new high-speed light-rail passenger service would have to run on brand new rails since Conrail controls the existing tracks, using them for freight.

In tight fiscal times, it's easy to say the rail idea is pie in the sky. But we were impressed, both by the first steps being taken and the ultimate need for rail service.

First steps include \$600,000 now committed by SEPTA (the Philadelphia-based Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority), together with \$200,000 by Berks County's BARTA, for what they're calling the Schuylkill Valley Metro Study. When that analysis by transportation professionals is in, sometime in 1997, it will include the hard data and projections to permit a realistic regional debate.

What about the need for light rail? For Reading-to-Philadelphia service, it seems compelling. Route 422 is becoming a worse-and-worse traffic nightmare, headed for gridlock of emergency proportions within a few years. There appears to be no alternative in terms of highway expansion (save perhaps for double-decking Route 422, which would make rail expenses look trifling).

Light rail (operating at up to 70 miles per hour) would presumably make the Reading-Philadelphia run in 45 minutes as auto times stretch toward two hours or more. And then there's Berks County's problem of being a moderate to severe ozone non-attainment area under federal clean air rules - a clear threat to industry, present or future.

Berks County does need to worry about its economic future - retail as well as industrial. It needs to remember that, however lovely the countryside, this is not the center of the universe. For customers to visit its outlet malls, for all kinds of business, Berks needs to remain well connected to America's fourth largest metro region, just a few miles away.

Light-rail projects are now succeeding around America, from San Diego to Portland to St. Louis. It shouldn't take outsiders like ourselves to remind Pennsylvanians that theirs was the preeminent railroading state of America, that state subsidies (for Philadelphia-Harrisburg service, for example) are well established, that SEPTA's once-derided Philadelphia-Norristown light-rail connection is working well.

In Washington, it's now looking as if long-term federal commitment to assisting rail has endured Congress budget-axing moves. The bottom line is that light rail - perhaps extending beyond center-city Reading to Wyomissing - still needs hard debate, and would take years to put in place. But the stage is already being set. And the service would be a logical part of the intermodal transportation center for rail, buses and taxis now being planned at 7th and Penn through a \$2.2 million federal grant.

Eastward on the projected line, the Montgomery County commissioners voted in March to spend \$50,000 to study an imaginative plan to revitalize Pottstown's College Park District. The idea includes an open-space corridor linked to Riverfront Park with easy access to the rail line for students at the West Campus of Montgomery County Community College.

If the Philadelphia-Reading rail service were to be authorized and roll in the next years, it could well be the signal for potential restoration of rail service to Allentown to the northeast, and to Harrisburg, even Pittsburgh, to the west.

Each restoration of rail service opens up huge prospects for channeling new growth along the rail lines, allowing the population to grow without gridlock on the roads. Bus service would link with the rail stations, extending the access to thousands of additional commuters.

By tapping its railroad past, the Reading-Berks County community might both protect its landscape and lay a smart infrastructure base for an economically perilous 21st century.

## **THE UNBURIED TREASURE OF DOWNTOWN READING**

The awful things some people say about downtown Reading makes a newcomer look around for the pallbearers.

Here are some real quotes from our interviews:

" Downtown's decaying." " It's dying." " It's too dangerous." " Why spend any time there?" " Even the trees are dying." " The lights don't always work." " Hoodlums sit outside on the walks." " Kids in baby carriages scream their heads off right at downtown's gateway."

" Better watch out if you're down there at night." " There's killing right on the street, a lot of drug stuff going down."

" People are petrified to drive through the city, and won't do it."

" Downtown workers are afraid to go out shopping by themselves at lunch."

Excuse us! Wherever the downtown-is-all-bad-and-nobody-can-do-anything-about-it mindset came from, it's time to trade it in.

Grasp this downtown's layout from the air. Drive its historic streets with rowhouses and small shops. Walk around in the surrounding neighborhoods. A smart eye sees opportunity - not some kind of inevitable decline.

Much of the housing around the downtown area is threatened with inadequate upkeep, but as one leading business executive remarked wryly, " Even our slums are made of brick."

This gritty city of Germans, Poles, Italians and, most recently, Latinos, has a rich history. But it might have an even brighter future if the good citizens of Berks County cared enough to nurture and invest in the center of the famed city that gave birth to their community.

Everyone knows about the drain of large-scale retail to Fairgrounds Square and the Berkshire malls, the still-powerful appeal of the outlets, the shifting sands of real estate over the recent Meridian/CoreStates bank merger.

Still, downtown recovery, or clever readaptation if you care to call it that, is brewing on so many fronts it's a challenge just to keep track of the developments. Top billing, of course, goes to the would-be-aborning civic center with its new arena and an improved Rajah Theatre. Now the commonwealth is on the line. As the county commissioners dawdled over the hotel tax in early 1996, we kept thinking: " This is in your interest. Get with it, guys."

Berks County's excellent transit system, though imperiled by the diminished federal funding, is planning a major terminal at 7th and Penn streets. This could become the principal staging area where trains and buses converge, where visitors get vital information about the full range of things to see and do in Berks.

Too many people today head for the outlets and then head out of town. With a little clever marketing, that can be changed. Indeed, the outlets pose a missed opportunity as big as the Grand Canyon. Here come 10 million people a year into town, dollars in pockets, itching to buy. Of course, they come for outlets. And, of course, outlets need to come first. But millions of the same individuals might, with proper preparation, buy a two-, maybe three-package tour that includes some of Berks County's many attractions.

For starters: A fine old downtown with many historic structures, the Reading Phillies, Mount Penn, Neversink Mountain, the Pagoda, Blue Marsh Lake, the Reading Public Museum, the Daniel Boone and Conrad Weiser homesteads, farmers markets, picturesque farmlands and a great set of restaurants, some (like Joe's, the incredible mushroom restaurant) nationally famous.

Maybe a powerful new Berks Tourism Commission needs to be formed to push all that. We heard that individual outlet malls see things a narrow way, too often resisting cooperative effort. A touch of dynamic leadership should make it clear to all that there's strength, indeed profit, in collaboration.

Indeed, there seems to be one untapped opportunity a week, from Philadelphia crowds, to the Phillies games, to jazz fests, to the Kutztown Pennsylvania German Festival. Visitors to these events can and should be roped into all manner of other activities in



Berks County and, with some basic outreach, could be.

For some, the new inter-modal transportation center planned for downtown Reading might be a good spot. Why not put a set of kiosks there with touch screens tempting visitors to sample more of the region's fare? Indeed, why not arrange to have such kiosks in all the outlet malls of Berks County?

This past winter the business community launched a Downtown Improvement District. It puts sanitation and security staff on the street to make downtown cleaner and safer, working carefully with merchants to solve problems quickly. Its board sets strategies to build on the assets that downtown already has.

Two months and seven newsletters into the task, the DID reported picking up debris ranging from two sets of moose antlers, one fire hydrant, two reclining chairs and a deceased cat.

Even bigger downtowns - Philadelphia, New Orleans, Seattle, Portland, Denver, for example - have found DIDs to have powerful effect on the appearance, safety and friendliness of the downtown environment. Some even move into the business of soliciting stores to fill out a retail mix, much as a mall does. That ought to be on the to-do list for Reading's new DID.

Also in downtown, a new regional headquarters for CoreStates is entering the final stages of construction, and, as it fills, the older buildings to be vacated - talked about mostly as a crisis - are prime territory for new business.

Why not, for example, use some of that empty space as incubator space for emerging entrepreneurs and their projects? The Berks County Chamber of Commerce has been looking all over Berks County for an incubator site. Why not locate it downtown and solve two problems at once.?

Everyone seems worried about the city's young people, and some Berks citizens seem obsessed with a stereotype of young people. You see a male teen-ager, and you expect a vicious gang rounding the corner. The truth, of course, is that young people generally behave in response to the way they're treated. Downtowns need to make them welcome, not treat them as pariahs.

Why not turn some of downtown Reading's surplus space into a youth center, organized, perhaps, with help of the Berks Coalition for a Healthy Community?

Youth achievement could be recognized through art displays in lobbies or store windows, better organized apprentice opportunities, space for dances or concerts that

the kids plan themselves, or convenient places to get advice on planning next steps in training and education.

It is striking, visiting Reading in the mid-'90s, to see vast empty lots and learn they've been vacant for 20 years or more. These are not Superfund sites, they're just empty urban spaces, serviced by water and sewer and electricity, ready for construction.

Belatedly, some construction seems to be planned. A major housing complex for 8th and Penn streets, for example, will start with 38 housing units for elderly citizens. Two more phases would add another 78 units and there also are plans for a separate, 58-unit assisted-living center. The architectural drawings look handsome. A missed opportunity is not going for market-rate downtown housing, which would be available to all interested people.

Obviously there's a deficit of confidence about the demand for people to move to the center of Reading. Otherwise, the 8th and Penn project wouldn't have been earmarked for senior citizens only. But the Silk Mill apartments, close to center-city at 11th and Marion streets, one of very few market-rate residential buildings in the area, rarely shows a vacancy sign.

The object has to be any and all activities to draw - and keep - people downtown. Obvious candidates include ethnic festival days, which would help the Berks family of nations to find out more about each other.

And then there's the riverfront, Reading's early window to the world, intolerably scarred over decades by devastated buildings and old stills. Wouldn't it be a natural draw for high-quality townhouses and condominiums? A mix of housing and small office complexes, with gardens, walking and biking paths would reclaim the waterfront's natural heritage.

Reading's portion of the Schuylkill Heritage Corridor - championed for years by Victor Yarnell, a former Reading mayor - could reveal the treasures of the "hidden river" while raising the curtain on Reading's long intermission as the region's leader.

The Downtown Improvement District may represent a new departure - we surely hope it does. We do know that for too long the words leadership and downtown have rarely appeared together in a single sentence about Reading.

But why?

Given strong leadership, other older-American cities, spread from Portland, Maine, to Galveston, Texas; Savannah, Ga., to Santa Monica, Calif., have been revived as vibrant

gathering places and (despite the malls' retail dominance) as renewed centers of commerce.

Lowell, Mass., in the early 1800s America's premier industrial center with its mighty water-powered mills, was reduced by the early '70s to a blighted remnant of its Industrial Revolution grandeur. Yet, in a revolution of renewal started by one visionary Irishman and carried out by a doggedly determined young city planning director, the people of Lowell turned their negatives into assets.

Lowell's old mills sprang to new architectural life as museums, apartment houses and new business sites. The nearly six miles of stone-walled canals, with their gates and locks, anchored what eventually became a national cultural park. Old buildings were protected, ugly asphalt paving stripped off ancient brick pavers, pedestrian malls paid for with highway money.

In recent years, Lowell has started to struggle again, but its story still stands as an American triumph of self-renewal.

Chattanooga, Tenn., now almost chic, was one of those forlorn cities where the only downtown hold-outs seemed to be adult movie houses and bars. Choking on some of the nation's worst air pollution and drained of confidence by massive textile and steel mill closings, its citizens could have been excused for giving up by the early 1980s.

Instead, 70 of them started meeting together in a downtown storefront, and from those meetings came Chattanooga Ventures, a process that drew in more than 1,700 other citizens and produced more than 200 revitalization projects. Now there's the highly acclaimed Riverwalk, plazas and fountains leading to the Hunter Museum, the Tennessee Aquarium along the river, and the unique landmark and pedestrian delight that the community made of the old Walnut Street bridge. People in the suburbs brag about the downtown.

Seven years ago, Suisun City, Calif., an old harbor town sinking into a sea of suburbanization, found itself in deep trouble. Boarded-up storefronts, vacant lots and auto body shops pocked the town's historic Main Street. An oil distribution complex sat at the head of the heavily polluted, silt-filled Suisun channel.

Even worse, a post-World War II slum of fourplexes called The Crescent - overrun by drug dealers, racked by crime - sat cheek-by-jowl with the old town center. A San Francisco Chronicle survey called Suisun City the worst place to live in the Bay Area.

The city's leaders connected with an imaginative design company, and using a bold financing technique, set out to stretch the community's strengths to the limits. They

dredged the channel in 1993. Rotting metal prefab warehouses were torn down, replaced by a handsome waterfront promenade, a marina, a town plaza and civic center space, all with designs debated spiritedly within the community.

The old rail station was revived as a terminal connecting trains, local bus services and cross-country Greyhounds. The slums were razed. The druggies seemed to just disappear. Other residents were given vouchers to help them rent better homes.

The Reading downtown story? It's waiting to be written.

## **DOWNTOWN STORY: CARROT AND STICK CHALLENGE**

As they seek a comeback, America's downtowns - Reading included - need to be both tough and alluring. They must be tough in demanding their legal rights and a fair break, alluring so that people will want them to succeed.

The issue of the federal offices that fled from downtown Reading to Berkshire Boulevard in Wyomissing in 1992 is a perfect example. Four groups of workers - the Social Security Administration; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms; the Department of Labor; and the Defense Logistics Agency - were relocated to 30,000 square feet of suburban office space.

The move, countenanced by the federal government's General Services Administration, should never have happened. Ronald E. Miller, Reading's director of community development, is correct in saying that an executive order, dating from the presidency of Jimmy Carter, specifically mandates a preference for cities in locating federal offices.

The executive order was issued for compelling reasons. If cities lose their employment base, the whole society pays a huge price. Sprawl development devours farmland. This is accompanied by air pollution, traffic congestion, imperiled city economies and the loss by low-income residents - who may need them the most - of mass-transit-accessible jobs in the urban core.

Reading, somewhat after the fact, did protest the 1992 moveout in a federal court suit. Federal Judge Franklin S. VanAntwerpen specifically ordered the General Services Administration to make a good-faith effort to restore some of the lost offices to the city.

But the judge failed to put any teeth in his order. Now the issue is in the forefront again as the five-year lease of the Wyomissing facilities comes due in 1997.

Reading ought to make every possible effort to win back the offices it lost. Since

CoreStates Bank probably will be pulling hundreds of jobs out of downtown Reading and is offering a number of large office structures for sale, some directly on Penn Square, getting the offices back is more urgent than ever.

The mayor, council and city manager should push to recapture the federal offices. They should not be shy about turning to their friends in Congress for help. No one needs to worry about the owners of the campus-like offices in Wyomissing. They'll have little difficulty refilling their space. It's downtown Reading that needs the help - now.

But while Reading wields a legal and political stick, we urge it to try carrots, too. The city should seek early meetings with the federal workers, do all it can to make sure everything possible is done to make their return to the city a positive experience.

Representatives of the new Downtown Improvement District should be brought into the conversations. Maybe suburban-style free parking (which some of the federal workers reportedly find important) can't be part of a deal bringing the offices back into town. But a smart Reading city government has to view federal tenants as customers to be wooed and cultivated. That means an attractive, safe, inviting, even stimulating work setting. In today's world, the successful cities will be those that learn to be vigorously entrepreneurial.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Neal R. Peirce and Curtis W. Johnson, authors of this report, have extensive backgrounds in the study of regional problems and possibilities.

Peirce, a 1954 Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Princeton University, started his career as political editor of Congressional Quarterly and, in 1969, was founder of the National Journal, a publication to which he still contributes.

His interest in cities and states resulted in a series of books, culminating in "The Book of America: Inside 50 States Today."

For the last 20 years, he has written the country's first and only nationally syndicated column on state and local government themes.

The Washington, D.C., resident, with Johnson, has written the Peirce Reports, which for several years have identified regional opportunities in such places as Philadelphia, Phoenix, Seattle, Baltimore and Dallas.

The Reading report is their 12th collaborative effort.

Johnson, who has a doctorate from the University of Texas, spent nearly four years in the Minnesota governor's office pushing major reforms in health care and education. He was chief of staff when he left to pursue his interest in regional issues.

He and Peirce, after completing six Peirce Reports, wrote the book "Citistates: How Urban America Can Prosper in a Competitive World."

Among other accomplishments, Johnson was founding publisher and is a frequent columnist for the Minnesota Journal, and is a frequent commentator on television and radio.

The Minnesotan is also chairman of the Metropolitan Council, the regional planning agency for the greater Minneapolis-St. Paul area.

In assembling information for their Reading report, Peirce and Johnson were assisted by Terry Knox Ramseur, community outreach director for the United Way of Berks County, and Patricia C. Giles, program manager for the Berks Community Foundation.

Ramseur, a Reading resident who received her law degree from the University of North Carolina, has served on the boards of Neighborhood Housing Associates and Junior Achievement of Berks County, Inc.

Giles of Lower Heidelberg Township has spent much of the last 20 years volunteering in various leadership capacities for area non-profit organizations. They include Leadership Berks, United Way, the former People Against Rape, Planned Parenthood and the Berks Community Housing Council.

She is a past president of the Junior League of Reading. As a result of her affiliation with the organization, she helped develop Beacon House, a transitional housing facility for homeless families.

## **WHY A PEIRCE REPORT?**

Simply, it's because the citizens of Reading and Berks County need a wake-up call - a strong reminder that an ailing Reading is not going to get well by itself, and that unless treatment is forthcoming the disease will spread outward into the county from the infected core.

Thanks to the strong public commitment of the Berks County Community Foundation, in conjunction with local companies, it was possible to enlist two nationally known experts in identifying regional problems and suggesting opportunities to help solve them.

Neal R. Peirce and Curtis W. Johnson conducted scores of interviews and did extensive research before preparing this detailed report. They also applied the knowledge they have learned in 11 previous urban-area studies to help find solutions for this community.

It is obvious they were able to pinpoint many of Reading and Berks County's most pressing problems. It is equally obvious that their proposals should be taken seriously and become the basis for community action.

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