



March 18, 2008

Yonkers should emulate Philadelphia's 'civic vision' for waterfront

Harris Steinberg

A wave of optimism is washing across America's waterfronts. From Chicago to Dallas and Seattle to Washington, waterfronts are fast becoming our new urban frontiers. Formerly polluted and congested industrial city edges are giving way to active, integrated and sustainable pedestrian-scaled urban centerpieces. Critical public investments are being made to attract the workers of the knowledge economy - the peripatetic creative class who can choose to live anywhere.

So, why Yonkers? What would attract the next wave of committed urbanists to make Yonkers a city of choice in the new economy? How can a city capture its spirit of place in crafting a vision for the future? What planning and civic engagement tools are useful to consider? As Yonkers grapples with the future of its waterfront, how can it ensure that planning and development choices made today will be viewed as transformative investments for future generations?

Philadelphia recently completed a 13-month public planning process to create a civic vision for seven miles of the Delaware riverfront in central Philadelphia. Including 1,100 acres of former industrial lands, this important city asset lay fallow for nearly 50 years - cut off from the city by shifting global economies and an interstate highway.

Recent development pressures prompted by changes in public interest in riverfront living along with the prospect of two state-mandated casinos along the river caused the city to sit up and take notice. With the official plan for the riverfront more than 25 years old, it was time for a fresh look. The old, top-down planning model was no longer palatable to Philadelphians as negotiations for projects made on a parcel-by-parcel basis threatened to cordon off the riverfront behind a wall of tall buildings on parking podiums.

PennPraxis, the clinical outreach arm of the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania that I direct, was asked to lead the public process to create a civic vision that balanced civic values, quality urban design with private investment (<http://www.planphilly.com/vision>). Working under executive order of Philadelphia Mayor John F. Street, the process was guided by a 46-member advisory group that included civic association representatives, government officials and members of the non-profit community. Against the backdrop of an outdated zoning code, union politics, strong-armed state planning tactics and a host of internecine neighborhood politics, the process was a rough and tumble ride through Philadelphia's collective psyche.

The key to the success of the process was civic engagement - active listening along with open and transparent meetings and decision-making that engaged more than 4,000 Philadelphians in more than 200 public and stakeholder meetings to create a civic vision that was embraced both publicly and critically. Working with the Penn Project on Civic Engagement, we reached out to large numbers of stakeholders in highly facilitated public meetings to distill citizen values concerning the waterfront into planning principles that were used to guide the design process.

Indeed, the vision recently was awarded a 2008 Charter Award from the Congress for the New Urbanism - acknowledging it as a model process that overcame the traditional obstacles ("a

governmental planning and design environment weighted down by conflicts of interest") to creating good urbanism.

The underlying principles of the vision include connectivity and sustainability: creating a 21st century network of roads, boulevards, parks and open spaces that extend Philadelphia's classic urban fabric to the river's edge. It calls for public investment in "green" infrastructure - riparian buffers that actively filter pollutants and manage storm water while regenerating native flora and fauna. It dares the city to think big and long term while setting the stage for early wins and immediate action.

This is not business as usual for Philadelphia and it ruffled some well-connected development feathers. It raises expectations for the city and the region in terms of how the marriage of citizen values and expert knowledge can create an informed citizenry who can offer informed advice to policy makers and implementers.

Yonkers stands on the shoreline of tomorrow. How well it responds to the changing urban landscape and positions itself as a city of choice for the next generation will be reflected in the decisions it makes along its river's edge. It is possible to balance public good with private development. While the challenges are great, the potential for truly transformative investment in the future is enormous - with the opportunity to leave a treasured legacy for generations to come.

The writer is executive director of PennPraxis at the School of Design of the University of Pennsylvania and executive planner, Civic Vision for the Central Delaware Riverfront in Philadelphia.
