

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Impediments to revitalization

Back in May of 2002, about 50 real estate professionals were invited to The Hill School's arts center for a presentation about the merits of living and working in Pottstown.

Pottstown's economic development director talked about the fledgling Keystone Opportunity Zone, the new borough hall and town plaza, and his high hopes for the redevelopment of the vacant Mrs. Smith's property. (So far, it's turned out to be townhouses.)

Other Pottstown officials then touted the borough's amenities and quality of life.

Three impediments

A general discussion followed. The real estate professionals identified three key impediments to buying a home or business in Pottstown: high taxes, the poor reputation of the school district, and crime.

Interestingly, 14 years later, those same three concerns were raised by Pottstown Realtor Matt Green earlier this year at a neighborhood revitalization meeting at the Victory Christian Life Center on Washington Street.

1. High Taxes

Taxes are a genuine handicap. According to calculations by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the Pottstown School District ranks 12th of 500 districts in local taxation.

For at least the last decade, Pottstown has levied higher taxes than 97 percent of the school districts in the state.

No corresponding measurement is available for municipalities. However, the state Center for Local Government Services does compare tax revenues per capita among the state's boroughs, townships, and cities.

The most recent data show Pottstown placed 223 out of the state's 2,500 municipalities. This indicates that Pottstown borough taxes, per capita, are higher than 91 percent of the municipalities in the state.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

2. Schools

The second identified impediment is the quality of Pottstown's schools.

The school district has an unfavorable reputation, which dates back to the late 1960s. Changing perceptions began about the time the middle class started migrating from Pottstown to the surrounding suburbs.

Pottstown's unenviable reputation has more to do with prejudice than reality. The school district has a much higher percentage of low income and minority families than other school districts in the region.

Many people, unfortunately, equate minorities and poverty with inferiority.

Of course, we've all learned to be politically correct, so no one is going to say that. Instead, they are going to say the Pottstown School District is inferior. In fact, the opposite is true.

Pottstown can compete

A list of graduates in recent years shows that top Pottstown students can — and do — compete with anybody, anywhere. They are admitted into the nation's finest colleges and universities, and they excel once they get there. Two recent graduates, for example, are thriving at the University of Pennsylvania.

Moreover, Pottstown schools have a striking advantage over their suburban counterparts.

In the world of work, the ability to get along with other people is more important than academic knowledge.

By the time today's kindergartners are in their 40s, demographers tell us, America will be a white-minority country. Pottstown is far more reflective of what our nation is becoming than the overwhelmingly white districts surrounding us.

In Pottstown schools, from kindergartners to seniors, nobody cares about race.

3. Crime

The third impediment is crime — or rather, the perception of crime.

The reality is that crime rarely affects prudent citizens who avoid dangerous pastimes like drugs, drinking, and aggressive behavior.

The greatest danger faced by middle class people — no matter where they live — is car accidents, not crime.

(To be continued Thursday)