

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

YMCA closure: A done deal?

Last fall, without any prior warning, the Philadelphia Freedom Valley YMCA announced it was closing the Pottstown Y as of June 29, 2018.

Philadelphia Freedom Valley is the parent organization of nearly 20 local YMCAs in southeastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey, including Pottstown.

Irrevocable decision



Shaun Elliott, president and CEO, said the decision was irrevocable. The North Adams Street building is not sustainable, Elliott said.

Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

The building requires \$11 million in repairs, of which \$500,000 is required almost immediately to replace the boiler. In addition, Elliott said, the facility has an annual operating deficit of \$700,000.

Elliott directed the local YMCA director, Scott Cusworth, to assemble a task force of Pottstown civic leaders to explore alternative ways to continue providing the Y's services to the community. Task force members were specifically instructed not to question the decision to close the Y building.

Task force balks

But after three meetings, a number of task force members have done just that.

Prior to a fourth meeting, which was conducted last week, Pottstown area businessman Don Smale, a long-time patron of the Pottstown Y and task force member, sent an email to his colleagues listing a host of concerns.

"I am very uncomfortable being a part of an organization charged with providing recommendations on how to break apart an organization that has been a foundation of our community for (138) years.

"... I have had numerous conversations with community members.... The response to the closure ranges from disbelief to anger.

"It is widely recognized that closure will leave a significant 'hole' in the community. Families, parents, children, schools and seniors all lose."

"My guess is the YMCA hierarchy is hoping (the task force) will help soften the blow...."

No local representation

Smale noted the YMCA's decision was made without any input or representation from Pottstown.

He noted that when the Pottstown Y merged with Phoenixville in 2007, the Pottstown operation was breaking even. "How did we get to a \$700,000 annual operating loss?"

Back in 2007, Smale said, it was noted the Pottstown boiler needed attention. But Pottstown had a \$2.8 million endowment fund earmarked for fixing the boiler and helping fund construction of an Upper Perkiomen YMCA building.

"Now, ten years later, Upper Perk is completed but the boiler is the most pressing reason for closing Pottstown?"

Parent organization profitable

Looking at the most recent IRS filing of the Philadelphia Freedom Valley YMCA, Smale noted the organization posted a 2016 profit of \$5.35 million. Its cash grew from \$15.5 million in 2015 to \$19.4 million in 2016. Its net assets are more than \$110 million.

Smale is one of several task force members who want more information from Philadelphia Freedom Valley before acquiescing to the closure of the Pottstown Y.

Wednesday: How Pottstown lost control of its destiny through two mergers.



The Philadelphia Freedom Valley YMCA says the Pottstown Y on North Adams Street is not financially sustainable and must close. Local YMCA patrons and civic leaders question that decision and seek more information.