

Illustration by Rich Hauck.

FREE PARKING?

No, it's not Monopoly. It's Harrisburg. | BY LAWRENCE BINDA

To butcher a famous literary phrase: “Let us now praise HBG famous men (and women).” In my column last month, I took to task certain Harrisburg officials who seem determined to strangle downtown’s housing renaissance in its infancy.

But I feel I also should offer praise where it’s due, and nowhere is it due more than with the complicated, difficult issue of downtown parking.

Yes, parking.

Four years ago, Harrisburg’s financial recovery plan went into effect, and, to save itself from insolvency, even bankruptcy, the city entered into a convoluted, 40-year deal to lease out its cash-rich parking system.

Harrisburg surrendered control of its garages, rates, fees, ticketing, enforcement—the whole shebang. From then on, city officials, it seemed, would be able to do little more than smile and accept it as the new operator hiked rates and tightened enforcement.

But that’s not what happened at all.

Oh, sure, the rate hikes happened—street-parking fees doubled—with the adverse effect on downtown business that everyone predicted, especially for the coveted happy hour/dinner business of downtown’s many restaurants and bars. But city officials proved far more resilient and imaginative than I would have thought possible, given their seemingly powerless position.

First, Mayor Eric Papenfuse made a risky bet that reducing street parking rates from \$3 to \$2 per hour from 5 to 7 p.m. would not lead to any loss for Park Harrisburg. With the support of City Council, the administration pledged to compensate the system operator for any lost revenue. The scheme worked. The city never had to shell out a cent, and the rate for these hours has remained at \$2 since.

Next, the city reached a deal with its mobile parking application provider for four free parking hours on Saturday by using the code “LUVHGB.” It then convinced Park Harrisburg to allow 15 minutes of free parking in downtown’s many loading zones, helping to address the problem of people avoiding downtown businesses for quick trips to pick up a sandwich or buy something at the hardware store.

Then, last month, City Council agreed to the grandest stroke yet. Under a new plan, the city will put up some money (\$110,000 from a fund that Park Harrisburg already owes the city) to make parking free after 5 p.m. throughout much of downtown.

Now, this idea didn’t start with the city. The credit really goes to the Harrisburg Downtown Improvement District, which got both the city and Dauphin County on board and is splitting the cost with them.

But there you go: free parking after 5 p.m., four hours free on Saturday and free loading zone parking for those who want to zip in and zip out—all implemented from a position of utter powerlessness. That deserves praise.

Several years ago, I took flack from some readers after I had the audacity to say a few nice things about the new parking regime. I said that I liked the freshly installed digital meters, which actually took credit cards, not just quarters. Also, with better enforcement, I finally could find parking downtown, previously impossible since, with little fear of getting a ticket, people would never move their cars. I didn’t even mind (too much) the admittedly ridiculous \$3 hourly rate if that was the price for helping the city get back on its feet financially.

However, I realize now that mine was a minority opinion. Most people in and around Harrisburg had grown used to cheap (or free) parking, seemed to regard it as their birthright, and nothing was going to change their minds. Even reducing the rate to \$2 an hour didn’t bring back after-work drinkers and diners in their former numbers.

Honestly, I lay part of the blame on the business owners themselves, who, with a few exceptions, seem utterly allergic to the concepts of marketing and community engagement. The same goes for Park Harrisburg and its parent, SP+, which have never bothered to try to educate people about the system and why and how to use it.

Do most folks even understand that downtown parking costs just \$2 an hour after 5 p.m., is free after 7 p.m., is free on Sunday and, with the mobile app, is basically for free on Saturday? For the most part, I don’t think so. Heck, it seems that, almost every day, I have to tell someone that Harrisburg no longer runs the parking system—four years after the city relinquished control of it.

This lack of outreach has allowed the problem to fester, giving people (especially suburbanites) another reason to hate on Harrisburg. It fed and affirmed an existing prejudice against the city, which sustained education and encouragement might have overcome. But that wasn’t done.

But maybe “free” will work. Maybe two bucks an hour is all that stands between suburbanites and a great meal or night out. Maybe any cost—a penny, a nickel, a dollar—is too much for folks accustomed to complimentary parking in vast surface lots. In time, we’ll see. We’ll also see if people actually get the message.

In any case, here’s to inventive, responsible local government. Harrisburg officials took a problem they had no business solving, in a system they had no right to change. And they helped solve it and change it. Praiseworthy indeed. **B**

Lawrence Binda is editor-in-chief of *TheBurg*.



TELL ME A STORY

Community, one tale at a time.

BY LAWRENCE BINDA

Bill Cologie is a print guy. When you walk into his newsstand, Transit News, all your senses tell you that you've just entered a tiny temple to ink on paper.

Magazines line the walls, and paperbacks fill up shelf space. You can almost smell the page pulp and feel the anticipation of what lies ahead as you flip through a new thriller or romance.

Bill resolutely remains in business inside Harrisburg's train station despite the fact that he depends upon two technologies that seem quaintly of another time—passenger rail and the printed word.

Bill has run his stand for 27 years, but, in recent months, felt his small business threatened by a state

Department of Transportation plan to remodel the station, which did not include space for Transit News.

I first heard of Bill's problem at a meeting of Capitol Area Neighbors, a community group of downtown Harrisburg residents, where I serve on the board. As we sat at a long table at Aleco's, eating pizza and discussing this or that neighborhood issue, a fellow downtown denizen mentioned Bill's plight. What could we, as a group, do?

Someone suggested contacting PennDOT. Another person wondered if PennLive would be interested.

"TheBurg will write that story," I said. And we did.

Our story led to more media coverage, and, meanwhile, Bill urged his customers to contact PennDOT,

which then met with him and pledged to include Transit News as part of its next design draft.

"It has been incredibly gratifying to read the messages sent to PennDOT and to see how much Transit News means to so many," Cologie said in a letter to his supporters.

Score one for community. In fact, recently, community action has been on something of a role in Harrisburg.

Just months earlier, a group of students had found out that HACC planned to cut six elective arts courses, including several—ceramics, glassblowing—that are hard to find elsewhere in the area. They mounted a petition drive that garnered some 20,000 signatures, and TheBurg also wrote that story, bringing the issue to greater public notice.

Within a week, HACC administrators had agreed to meet with the students and, in the end, restored five of the six courses.

"We heard you, and we listened," said HACC President John J. "Ski" Sygielski.

As newspapers fall on hard times, I sometimes wonder what will happen to stories like these in the future. If TheBurg weren't around, would Bill's story go untold? Would HACC students have had a tougher time getting their classes restored?

Just last month, we told of a few local men who plan to open Pennsylvania's first black-owned brewery, and that story became one of the most-read in our 10-year history. I recently ran into them, and they graciously thanked us for telling their story, which, like in Bill's case, led to yet more media coverage.

"I didn't realize you guys had such reach," said co-founder Shaun Harris. "Someone from Erie contacted us."

The trio since have set up a Kickstarter page to raise funds for their new Allison Hill brewery. If you're so inclined, please make a donation.

My favorite recent community story actually has its roots in the rather distant past.

Almost a decade ago, when TheBurg began, one of the first columns that I wrote featured a group that called itself, "Right Site Harrisburg." These residents had taken on a monumental task, getting the federal government to do something it definitely did not want to do—locate its new courthouse on a forlorn patch of grass and gravel outside of downtown Harrisburg.

And they succeeded. Their effort, I wrote at the time, was a stunning example of how grassroots activism could lead to change. But, honestly, I was surprised then, and remain surprised today, that this group of just regular people could unite all the major players—from neighborhood groups to the Harrisburg Chamber to political representatives—behind their plan, which, together, put pressure on the U.S. Judiciary and General Services Administration.

The groundbreaking just took place in June so that, in about three years, a new courthouse will rise from the rubble (literally), seeding an entire area that is ripe for redevelopment.

But, for the community, that wasn't the end of the story. When I covered the groundbreaking, I was shocked to find that no one from Right Site Harrisburg had been asked to the invitation-only event. In fact, during the hour-long ceremony, full of VIPs and self-congratulation, their vital contribution was ignored entirely. One now-elderly woman, a key member of the group, was turned away at the entrance by heavily armed guards from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Her name was not on the list.

This slight prompted me to write a short piece that, while it could never undo the injustice, perhaps brought a small measure of recognition to these forgotten people—without whom this day never would have arrived.

Journalism, today, finds itself in a world of pain. Reporters face dramatic cutbacks in staff and coverage, destructive mandates from distant corporate parents, relentless abuse from the highest levels of government and, as we saw in Annapolis in June, sometimes literal attack.

Most journalists simply want to tell good stories and make positive contributions to their communities, often working long hours for little pay to do so. Certainly, TheBurg shares this purpose.

I'm delighted that, from time to time, we can step back and see the small ways in which we may have helped make a difference, even if it's just one guy in one newsstand in one train station in central Pennsylvania. **B**

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DISSIMILAR CITY

None of these things are like the others.

BY LAWRENCE BINDA

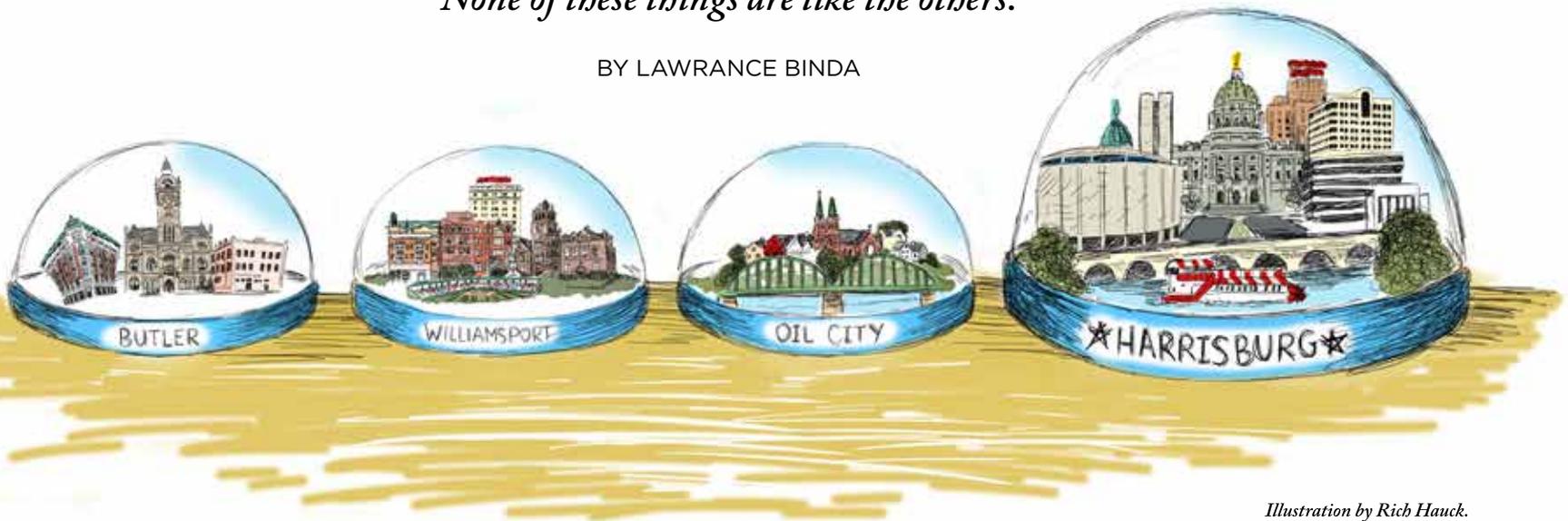


Illustration by Rich Hauck.

How similar is Harrisburg to other cities in Pennsylvania? For instance, how similar is Harrisburg to places like Oil City, Shamokin and Cory?

I ask because this issue arose repeatedly during the state legislature's joint hearing in late September on whether to allow Harrisburg to retain the special taxing privileges it enjoys under Act 47, the state's program for financially distressed municipalities.

For some state Assembly members, the subtext was this: What makes Harrisburg so darn special? Why should it have rights not extended to the commonwealth's other small cities?

I felt that this line of questioning was crafted to be critical, posed by legislators reluctant to allow the city to retain its current, elevated local services tax (LST) after it departs Act 47. Nonetheless, it's a good question.

So, then, is Harrisburg different from the other 55 or so cities in Pennsylvania? Yes, it is. Very.

Harrisburg is the state capital. Its small population doubles every day, meaning that it needs to provide—and pay for—services well beyond those needed by its own residents. Moreover, about half of its property can't be taxed due to state and nonprofit-owned land. It has a large service economy and a high poverty rate.

Those are just a few of the many ways that Harrisburg is different.

But Harrisburg hardly stands alone in its uniqueness. Take a trip across this vast state. Travel from artsy Lancaster to struggling Carbondale to woodsy Bradford. Go from touristy Bethlehem to rapidly changing Hazleton to tiny Arnold.

You may enjoy your journey; you may not. But you certainly won't come away thinking, "Wow, these cities in Pennsylvania are *so* alike."

Truly, there's just one thing that ties together these extremely different places. They share the most superficial of links—a definitional one—what the state terms a "city."

Now, it wasn't always like this. For a long time, the state's small cities did share a set of commonalities.

In the early 19th century, they were largely county seats and market towns, centers of population and commerce surrounded by vast acres of farmland. Many later became industrial boomtowns—oil for Bradford and Oil City; coal for Shamokin and Carbondale; steel and railroads for Harrisburg and many others.

Many similarly shared a fate on the back end of the boom—depopulation, disinvestment, financial distress. People and wealth once concentrated in these places migrated out to the surrounding townships, spurred on by state and federal housing, road and transit policies that favored new, dispersed suburbs over old, dense cities.

Most cities became shells of their former selves and many ended up, like Harrisburg, in Act 47.

Fast-forward to today, and cities like Harrisburg, Farrell, McKeesport, Monessen, Lock Haven and Easton have virtually nothing in common with one another. Over the past 50 or so years, Pennsylvania's smaller cities have become service-oriented, while others remain largely industrial. Each is trying to find its own way forward based on its distinct location, history and situation. It's therefore illogical to force them to abide by the same set of fiscal rules.

In "Communities in Crisis," a report released last year, the Pennsylvania Economy League, a nonprofit policy organization, described an alarming "fiscal decay" among the commonwealth's cities and urged the legislature to take action.

"The fiscal situation on average in cities has deteriorated, and many are likely experiencing distress regardless of whether they are in the state's Act 47 program," the report stated.

The report advocated a wholesale re-examination of the rules governing local government in Pennsylvania, possibly including greater taxing flexibility.

As stated above, Harrisburg is an especially unique case. Here, a small, largely poor population pays to provide services to a huge number of mostly better-off, suburban commuters—who often work in buildings that also cannot be taxed.

Under state code, Harrisburg can charge these workers an LST of just \$1 per week each. However, because it's been in Act 47, Harrisburg has been able to tax them a bit more—\$3 per week. This small financial boost has worked. Service levels are returning, and the city is experiencing an economic revival as it's set to emerge from a historic financial crisis.

While that solution worked for Harrisburg, I don't presume to know what works best for Beaver Falls, Hermitage, New Castle, Sunbury or Wilkes-Barre, small cities vastly different from one another. But I do know this. The leaders of those cities understand the needs of their communities better than distantly domiciled state legislators, much less the Stetson- and Oxford-clad gentlemen of another time who promulgated the current code, who never could have imagined the dire future of the state's small cities.

Harrisburg, Altoona, Butler, Connellsville, York, Washington, Williamsport—they are all unique places, despite the shared designation of "city." The commonwealth should allow them maximum flexibility in setting their own rules and guiding their own futures. **E**

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