

WHAT'S UP WITH THAT?

*Piece by piece,
a city rebuilds.*

BY LAWRENCE BINDA



When I arrived in Harrisburg some 11 years ago, I had quite a few “what’s up with that?” moments. For instance, a large, boarded-up stone building at 3rd and Boas streets that clearly had once been a stunner—what’s up with that? Ditto, the tall, majestic building a few blocks away, blighted and deteriorating, and the abandoned brick pile on Verbeke Street that had a few fading Art Deco flourishes.

What was up with all of these—and many others?

As a new resident, I wanted to know how they had reached their lowly states, especially since they all were located so close to the Capitol complex, home to thousands of state workers daily.

Perhaps my greatest “what’s up with that?” came the first time that I saw the 1000-block of N. 6th Street. Here was an entire block of blight, with one major exception, the popular lunchtime spot, the Jackson House.

Every day, hundreds of state employees breezed right by these ruins to grab a legendary Jackson House burger or sub. Logically, you’d think that someone would see a business opportunity to re-develop this area. But no.

So, how did this happen?

It’s actually a complex story and one that, in the ensuing years, TheBurg would return to again and again. I can’t tell it all in this space, but it shares two elements common to most blight stories in Harrisburg—and in other once-thriving industrial cities across the United States.

Element #1: Flight. Starting in the 1950s, industry closed, and people began leaving the city for the suburbs, commuting in for, increasingly, service-sector jobs, which, in Harrisburg’s case, mostly meant state government. The 1972 flood was the nail in the coffin here, as residents took their federal flood money—and the few pennies that opportunistic slumlords gave them for the properties—and fled in a second huge wave.

Element #2: Disinvestment. Property owners stopped maintaining their buildings. Typically, they rented them out, for increasingly less money, until they became utterly uninhabitable. Then, instead of fixing them up, they boarded them up, and the dilapidation continued. Some fell apart slowly, others collapsed suddenly. Some sold for taxes, some landed with the Redevelopment Authority, others were flipped to speculators who let them rot further.

All of this happened to the 1000-block of N. 6th Street.

Of the six properties on the west side of the street, one caught fire, one collapsed in a storm, one pancaked in, one was boarded up and the other should have been. Only the Jackson House, smack-dab in the middle of the street, remained truly sound.

And that, in a nutshell, was what was up with that.

Also, the blight fed on itself so that, for more than 50 years, few imagined that

any of the old commercial streets of Midtown Harrisburg could be any different. But then they were.

Fortunately, it turned out that the opposite also could happen. Just as blight can spread, so can redevelopment, and that’s where we are now in this story.

Over the past decade, nearly every one of the blighted, boarded-up buildings I saw on my first walk through Midtown has been renovated and redeveloped.

One is now StartUp. One is H*MAC. One is the Millworks, and another is the Coba apartment building. There’s Midtown Scholar and the Susquehanna Art Museum and ModernRugs and Campus Square and numerous smaller shops and restaurants like Yellow Bird Café, Pastorante and Urban Churn. One is even TheBurg.

Redevelopment has become such a powerful force that it’s now rolled over even the most desperate of streets—the 1000-block of N. 6th.

Currently, three of the buildings are being redeveloped as a mix of apartments and retail. Brothers LeSean and LeRon McCoy, Harrisburg natives and professional football players, are investing in the block, undertaking two cellar-to-roof renovations. They also hope to buy and build new on the vacant corner parcel, where the former Bethel AME Church burned down in 1995.

This street has a great deal of meaning to Harrisburg. It is one of notable history, the last remaining block of what was once an extensive African-American commercial enclave—a street of barbers, rooming houses, hotels, groceries and other businesses that catered largely to a black clientele in segregated Harrisburg, and it was almost lost. Well, unfortunately, some of it indeed was lost, but some now will be saved, so that life will return again to the street—that is, for more than a quick bite at lunchtime.

I find that, in Harrisburg (maybe everywhere), there are the glass-half-full and the glass-half-empty people. The latter might say—well, that’s fine for Midtown, but what about the rest of the city?

I try to be an optimist, but understand their point, too. Heck, on my block, two small apartment buildings have been condemned this year alone. There are still far too many old-time property owners who regard Harrisburg as only a place to extract money from, not invest in, seemingly believing that even simple building maintenance is a dollar out of their pocket.

But I’m not going to begrudge redevelopment where it happens. A revived 6th Street is good for the city, especially because it links up with other progress nearby, creating a critical mass to attract people and motivate further investment. It’s gotten to the point that, walking around the city, I still have my “what’s up with that?” moments. However, when I do, it’s because I see the boards coming off and construction signs going up. **B**

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Illustration by Rich Hauck.

TUNE IN, TURN OUT

*Last month,
Harrisburg engaged.*

BY LAWRENCE BINDA



Illustration by Rich Hauck.

If you're a Harrisburg voter, last month's municipal election may have seemed like a snoozer.

The city had some big races this year, but all the action was in the primary back in May. By the time November's general election rolled around, the contests for school board and City Council were all but decided, since the Democrats had no Republican opposition.

Then there was the county.

Dauphin County had numerous seats up for grabs this year, and they proved to be surprisingly competitive.

Sure, in the end, it was more like Groundhog Day than Election Day, as, once again, Republicans swept every row office—from treasurer to register of wills to recorder of deeds. But it was only the last batch of results on election eve, flowing in after 11 p.m., that put several GOP incumbents over the top.

Indeed, for much of the night, it appeared that the Democrats just might break the Republican Party's stranglehold on the county's elected positions. And, to the extent that it was nip and tuck for the first few hours after the polls closed, much of the credit goes to the city of Harrisburg.

For some reason, Harrisburg precincts tend to be among the first to report their results. Sure, there are some laggards but, often, the first half-dozen or so precincts to report are all from the city.

In overwhelmingly Democratic Harrisburg, these early results offered some hope for the challengers, as the city turnout in this election was stronger than expected—at least as expected by me.

Going into Election Day, I wasn't optimistic at all about turnout.

First of all, it was, for Harrisburg, an "off-off year" election. Not only were there no presidential, congressional or legislative contests to juice turnout, but there also was no mayoral election—the worst of all possible worlds to get city dwellers to the polls.

Yes, there were important races for school board and City Council, but, as I said above, there was little hanging in the balance as those outcomes had basically been decided during the May primary.

Then there was the fact that the county announced, rather late in the cycle, that it had to move several polling locations to comply with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act. I expected that move to depress turnout in several precincts, since the new locations tended to be far less convenient for most voters and, in a few cases, were actually outside the voting districts.

But I was wrong.

Turnout was not only significantly higher than the comparable voting period of 2015, but was also higher

than in 2017, when the city's incumbent mayor was on the ballot.

Every district reported higher turnout in Harrisburg, and, digging down into the data, several wards stood out. Riverside's Ward 14 and Midtown's Ward 5 and Ward 12 each jumped by more than 100 votes from 2015 to 2019. But there were gains nearly everywhere, from the river wards to Allison Hill to Uptown.

In 2019 overall, Harrisburg's turnout citywide increased by about 35 percent compared to 2015. In Dauphin County as a whole, turnout was up by 26 percent. Having said that—Harrisburg still has work to do to pull even with the county overall, as its 20-percent overall turnout lagged the county's 30-percent showing.

So then what's the takeaway? Why did things improve in the city?

First of all, Democrats made it a race, aggressively challenging several of the Republican incumbents. For instance, in 2015, Clerk of Courts Dale Klein was unopposed in the general. This year, she faced former city Councilman Brad Koplinski, who, for a time on election night, looked like he might pull off an upset. As I've said before in this column, campaigns matter, and they matter even more when trying to unseat a long-time incumbent.

Secondly, city Democrats may be fired up to vote given the national political climate. If so, the 2019 election may be just an appetizer for 2020. If that's true, buckle up, as turnout could be impressive indeed next year not only for the presidential but for the legislative and congressional races.

Third, I can't help but be impressed with the volume of votes that came out of certain wards in Harrisburg. Turnout in several wards, particularly in Midtown and Uptown, was up by more than 40 percent in 2019 compared to 2015. Something is going on here. Most likely, this is due to additional population, with the new residents more inclined to engage politically. And, in fact, county data show increases in voter registration in every river ward except one (10-1).

I'd like to wrap up this wonky election column with a deep bow to the hyper-engaged residents of Harrisburg's Ward 14—Riverside and far Uptown. They turned out to the tune of 41 percent of registered voters in this low-stakes, off-off year affair. I've been told that, if you're looking for community in the Harrisburg area, Riverside is the place to be, and these numbers back that up. My reporter's fedora is off to them. **B**

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



GIMME SHELTER

What's the best way for Harrisburg to address its housing shortage?

BY LAWRENCE BINDA

If you want to get a beat on Harrisburg's problematic housing situation, listening to Ahmad Ibrahim would be a good place to start.

The South Allison Hill resident not only owns his own house, but he leases out several others, all in his neighborhood, where renting, not owning, is the general rule.

To add to his bona fides: Ibrahim's graduate class at Penn State Harrisburg recently authored a paper called "An Exploratory Study of U.S. Capital Cities' Affordable Housing Policies"—and presented their results, twice, to City Council.

That's why I paid special attention when Ibrahim leapt up from his chair during a special council meeting back in May dedicated to a single topic—affordable housing in Harrisburg. The issue that so motivated Ibrahim was inclusionary zoning, and he had something to say about it.

Ibrahim stated that he isn't necessarily opposed to inclusionary zoning—the requirement that developers set aside a certain number of new units for low- and moderate-income people. He just thinks that Harrisburg's policy-makers are mistaken if they believe that inclusionary zoning will do much to solve the city's affordable housing problem.

"Inclusionary zoning is a very good idea to fix a problem that Harrisburg doesn't have," he said.

Why might this be?

Harrisburg's problem isn't really that developers refuse to build lower-income housing. It's that there's hardly any development at all, at any price point. So, there are nearly no apartments to "set aside." In short, the city suffers from a severe supply problem that isn't being remedied.

DROP IN THE BUCKET

Currently, the only substantial projects in Harrisburg are two office-to-apartment conversions next door to one another downtown on Pine Street, which together will add 72 rental units when they're done early next year.

In American cities, inclusionary zoning set-aside requirements vary, but typically mandate that 10 to 15 percent of total units be "affordable," assuming the project exceeds a certain number of units in total (for instance, at least 20 units).

Therefore, if it were subject to set-asides, the Pine Street project would have yielded seven to 10 affordable units, apartments priced maybe a couple of hundred dollars lower than the going market rate. (This assumes that, following a feasibility study, the project would be subject to any set-asides at all.)

Unfortunately, that's a drop in the bucket compared to the city's need. According to last year's Harrisburg housing study, hundreds of new units are needed right now, with the shortage expected to get much worse over the coming years.

Now, those seven to 10 units might mean something if Harrisburg were littered with cranes, with builders throwing up apartments to meet the city's shortage. But that's not the case.

Right now, Harritown—the developer of those Pine Street properties—is the only builder in the entire city doing new, market-rate projects on any scale. And it's only here because its stated mission, since the 1970s, is the redevelopment of downtown

Harrisburg. That's why it was formed, and that's why it's willing to take risks that other developers can't or won't take.

There is, literally, no other developer with a substantial, market-rate residential project actively in progress. I'm not exactly certain why that is. Maybe builders have not yet "discovered" Harrisburg or perhaps they don't see a reasonable return on investment or maybe their prospects are better elsewhere.

Whatever the reason, market-rate developers continue to avoid the city.

MORE SUPPLY

Harrisburg, though, does have another, and, I believe, more promising path forward, which also came up during that City Council meeting. According to last year's housing study, the city has some 4,000 vacant buildings located in every part of the city.

In addition, many other buildings are blighted and barely habitable, and there are countless empty lots that could be developed.

To cite just one example, S&A Custom Built Homes owns, by my count, 58 empty lots in its so-called MarketPlace development, a profoundly well-located townhome neighborhood just north of the Broad Street Market.

In 2005, the Harrisburg Redevelopment Authority sold those lots to S&A for \$1 apiece. That's right: a buck. In exchange, S&A promised to develop those units over the course of a decade—and that was 14 years ago. It started the project then stopped and hasn't built a new house there in years, which actually may jeopardize of its agreement with the authority.

In my view, Harrisburg would be better served putting its time and effort doing everything possible to increase supply—convincing developers that already own vacant land to build on it, putting blighted and abandoned buildings back into productive use and encouraging homeownership, which, in Harrisburg, can be substantially cheaper than renting and, all in all, is better for the city.

"We need to help people own the houses, more homeowners versus rentals," Ibrahim said. "That's what I'm trying to say."

Coincidentally, at that same meeting, council members heard from officials of the Lancaster Housing Opportunity Partnership, which offers loans to both builders and homeowners for fair and affordable housing. It would like to do more business in Harrisburg.

The city needs more housing "at every price point," stated COO Shelby Nauman.

"We're hoping, if we get more housing, things will come back into balance," she said. I agree.

Inclusionary zoning might, at some point, serve Harrisburg well, but that time has not come and is not near.

Sure, the city could pass an inclusionary zoning ordinance and sit and wait for development to occur. But, as they say in economics, hope is not a strategy.

Meanwhile, the city is littered with abandoned buildings, blighted properties, empty lots and rundown rentals that could be improved and owned. Focusing powerfully on these prospects would be a far more promising path to more housing in Harrisburg, which, in turn, would create a more livable, stable city. **B**

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