



## ROAD RETHINK

*Forster Street is an artifact of poor '50s planning. It's time to reassess.* | BY LAWRENCE BINDA

How's 1952 treating you?  
 "The Perry Como Show," Doris Day, duck and cover. Great stuff.  
 Wait, you don't recall these things?  
 Well, in a sense, you are living in 1952—in Harrisburg, we all are.

In that year, Gov. John S. Fine approved the widening of Forster Street, allowing the state to blast through a leafy, quaint residential neighborhood to create what eventually would become a nine-lane (six through, two parking, one turning lane) asphalt hellscape.

We are now living in someone else's reality, someone else's vision of Harrisburg, namely a bunch of state officials and engineers, long gone, who sketched out a future ruled by the automobile.

I have in mind Judge Doom from "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" as he dreamily imagined "eight lanes of shimmering cement" in place of Toon Town.

"They're calling it a freeway," he said, lost in a reverie. "My God, it'll be beautiful."

Like in the movie, plenty of stuff was inconveniently in the way on and near Forster Street—not fictional cartoon characters, but very real houses, businesses and human beings. But that was nothing that condemnation orders, property takings, bulldozers and blacktop couldn't remedy.

Where Judge Doom failed, the commonwealth of Pennsylvania succeeded.

As we enter the 2020s, it's perfectly reasonable to reassess this experiment. After all, 70 years seems plenty of time to judge whether or not something has worked.

In terms of moving workers to their jobs—the state's only concern during Howdy Doody times—I'd give Harrisburg's mini-freeway a grade of "C-minus."

It basically accomplished that mission, but at a very high cost. Yes, the street successfully carries traffic from the Harvey Taylor Bridge to the Capitol Complex and back, but it's also poorly engineered. Its width, speed off of the bridge and intersections with other busy city streets encourage speeding and light-running, which inevitably means crashes.

It's also, for 22 hours a day, far too wide. All of those lanes are unnecessary to carry the average traffic load for about 95 percent of the 168-hour week, a sign of poor road design, planning and vision. In other words, Forster Street is vastly overbuilt, which may not have been obvious in the 1950s, but is now.

In terms of its impact on Harrisburg—can I go lower than "F?"

Forster Street ripped the heart out of Harrisburg, dividing neighborhoods and creating a vast, dangerous chasm smack in the middle of the city. Built as an integrated series of walkable neighborhoods, Harrisburg became fragmented and inhospitable. Soon, Front and 2nd streets also became mini-highways, making residents feel that they were living on one big traffic island—and who wants that?

It's difficult to exaggerate the disaster that this was for the city. These road projects kicked off a decades-long death spiral of urban flight, depopulation and disinvestment that we're only now emerging from. Yes, state workers got to their jobs a little faster, paid for by the ruination of the capital city.

My understanding is that two aligned forces pushed the Forster Street expansion.

The first consisted of state officials under the sway of the wealthy and influential road construction industry, as well as powerful political boss Harvey Taylor, who saw the expansion of the Capitol complex and the grand boulevard leading up to it as a living monument to himself. In retrospect, they deserve all the censure we can muster.

The second force consisted of rank-and-file engineers and planners who likely believed this truly was the future. After all, Harrisburg was hardly alone in the urban highway trend. Roads were plowing through city after city, soon destabilizing and destroying them, too. If you were a civil engineer in the 1940s and '50s, knocking down buildings and throwing up highways was the thing to do.

But that was 70 years ago. Time moves on. Societies change, cities change, Harrisburg has changed. But Forster Street is essentially the same as the day the project's ribbon was cut in the 1950s. It's like we're in a time warp, living out someone else's failed vision of the future.

So, where to now?

It's time for a rethink. The state should be working with the city to assess all of its road infrastructure in Harrisburg—what works, what doesn't, and what might prepare us for the future, not just ignore or patch up past mistakes.

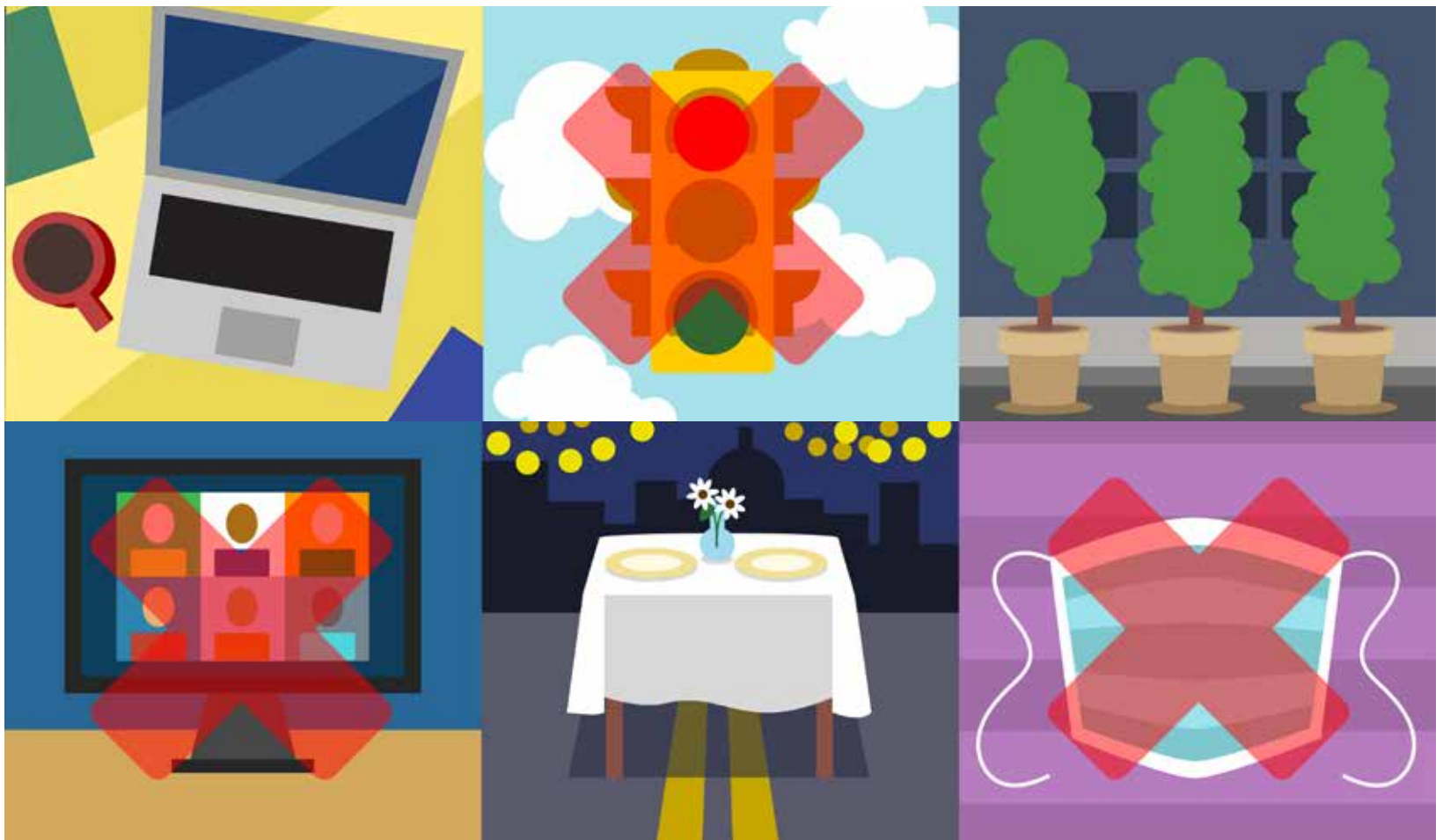
The thing is—we already know generally what this would look like based upon similar efforts in many cities around the country.

No, we can't go back in time and magically return Forster to a small neighborhood street, but we can integrate it better into its city. This might mean a slimmer street with wider sidewalks, more green infrastructure, differentiated pavement, bump-outs, bike lanes and other measures that put pedestrians and cyclists on a more equal footing with autos. People shouldn't fear for their lives simply because they want to cross the street between downtown and Midtown Harrisburg.

Harrisburg circa 1950 was a vastly different city than it was 70 years earlier—the mud-street, horse-centric 1880s. Likewise, Harrisburg of 2020 is vastly different than Harrisburg of 1950. To me, a rethink every 70 or so years is entirely reasonable. **B**

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*Illustration by Rich Hauck.*



## LET'S KEEP IT

*Pandemic life stinks, but our vast social experiment has yielded a few good ideas.* | BY LAWRENCE BINDA

My last few columns have been, in technical journalism jargon, a bummer.

Over the past few months, I've written about COVID this and COVID that—how the virus has harmed Harrisburg's small businesses and restaurants, as well as the awful effect it's had on our collective well-being.

Like many of you, I'm now looking beyond this year, which soon will come to its merciful end. And, with that, I'm hoping that 2021 will be a year of recovery as we gradually regain some sense of normalcy.

Having said that—our communal COVID experience hasn't been entirely worthless. As a country and a community, we've experimented with new ways of doing things, which we never would have considered absent this pandemic.

Sure, I'd like to feed most of the "new ways" straight into the shredder. I will dance gleefully around the bonfire watching my collection of facemasks burn, and nothing will make me happier than deleting my Zoom app. But a few of our experiments and adaptations have genuine merit, and I hope we retain them even after we're again granted the high honor of sitting at a bar.

To maybe no reader's surprise, street dining is the No. 1 item on my "let's keep doing this" list.

Harrisburg began shutting down downtown streets for al fresco dining in June, extending it three times as "Saturday Nights in the City," born out of desperation for our struggling restaurants, proved to be popular.

I expected plenty of pushback from the auto-addicted and maybe even traffic jams on surrounding blocks, but there was actually little of either. Instead, the traffic-free streets turned into one big, happy party, with humans

gathering to talk, laugh and chow down, taking back the city from our motorized masters.

Last month, TheBurg featured a painting of outdoors dining at Mangia Qui/Rubicon, showing North Street closed down. Seeing the cover, several people told me that this made Harrisburg look less like, well, Harrisburg, and more like a European street or square.

I think it's fair to say that, without the pandemic, this radical social experiment never would have happened. Shut down Harrisburg streets? Surely, you've lost your damn mind, man!

Likewise, I believe that Harrisburg should take some of its neglected, forlorn alleys, lay down pavers, put in plants and turn them into attractive pedestrian walkways. Many cities have done this successfully and, let's face it, almost anything would be an improvement over how those alleys look now—and what they're often used for.

The second item on my "let's keep it" list also touches upon the good old automobile. The pandemic demonstrated that many of us are able to work remotely—perhaps even more efficiently sometimes.

One-hundred-percent remote work may not be possible or desirable. But 50%, 25%? A white-collar city like Harrisburg, thick with office workers, would seem a perfect fit for a more mixed work environment.

This flexibility might offer greater work/life balance to our daily army of suburban commuters, but it would also help return the city to its residents. With less traffic, we could narrow State Street, narrow Forster Street and scratch the ridiculous I-83 widening—maybe even reduce the downtown portions of 2nd and Front streets to two lanes. I'm getting all flustered just thinking about it.

But then what happens to Harrisburg's office buildings?

Many would still be in use, since they're largely state-owned or leased. But others could be transformed to apartments, a trend that Harrisburg already has pioneered. Even before COVID hit, residential, not office, space was the hot commodity downtown. And less traffic and more green space would make the center city an even more desirable place to live.

Indeed, for much of human history, there was little distinction between living space and workspace. Then the automobile came along, and suddenly we had discrete places to live, work and play, with the car shuffling us between them.

Due to COVID, we seem to be returning to the old way of doing things.

I immediately can think of two friends—one in Midtown, the other in Shipoke—who both used to commute to jobs in Hershey. Since the pandemic hit, they've telecommuted from their Harrisburg homes and love their new, car-free lifestyles. Neither expects to ever return to the commuting grind.

I've read that rural areas might emerge as winners when people can live wherever they want, remote from their jobs. Perhaps. But a small, inexpensive city like Harrisburg might also have a competitive advantage, especially among people who also value walkability and easy access to urban amenities.

To the COVID-weary, I say—take heart! All year long, we've endured one massive dump of lemons. It's nearly time to make the mother of all lemonades. **B**

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*Illustration by Rich Hauck..*





# WISHING WELL

*Thoughts from an empty city.* | BY LAWRENCE BINDA

Some 35 years ago, a Don Henley song called “Boys of Summer” was an inescapable earworm on top-40 radio. Part of the song goes:

“Empty lake  
Empty streets,  
The sun goes down alone”

Walking around eerily quiet Harrisburg over the past month-plus, those lyrics have become fixed in my brain. I’ve thought of them maybe a hundred times jogging around Italian Lake, strolling through the downtown.

I sometimes wonder what I’ll remember most from this bizarre period in our shared history. More than anything, I may recall a feeling of isolation mixed with a sense of helplessness.

It’s like that with memories—you often feel them more than truly remember them.

As I run around the empty lake and stroll the empty streets, I wonder what Harrisburg will look like at the end of this.

Will my sick, elderly friend survive the pandemic? Will the local diner still be around? Will my neighbors be able to keep their restaurant going? Will TheBurg make it? Right now, I can’t guarantee any of these.

A few years ago, I wrote a column that I called, “FutureBurg,” in which I imagined a prosperous future for this little city on the river. That vision now seems as distant to me as what we once called “normal” life—the one in which we didn’t wonder about the health of the person who just passed us on the street or about what lays, unseen, on the countertop or currency we touched.

It’s certainly possible that, six months from now, we’ll return to our routines. The streets will get crowded again, the bars busy with customers, folks out of their houses, enjoying each other’s company. But it seems equally likely that this won’t happen at all. Even after the contagion eases and the “stay-at-home” orders are lifted, I fear that people will be slow to engage publicly again.

Will we become a nation of glove- and mask-wearers? Will we see danger on every door handle and drinking glass? And, if we do, you can be certain that the usual collection of crass capitalists and amoral politicians will be right there to exploit our fears, further dividing us for power and profit.

Recently, someone asked me if I thought society would change at all from this experience—and, by that, I think she meant change for the better. Clearly, I have my doubts about this. But to cheer myself up (because I obviously need cheering), I made a wish list.

So, here’s what I wish for, collectively, for the Harrisburg area. I don’t actually expect these things to happen, but, hey, I’ve had a lot of alone time to ponder the meaning of life.

*I wish* we could heal the east/west, city/suburb rift. Believe it or not, there are plenty of wonderful, well-intentioned people on both sides of the great, fake divide.

*I wish* that the zero-sum, us vs. them mentality would end. I believe this mindset holds us back from imagining and realizing a better, more prosperous future.

*I wish* the commonwealth would take greater responsibility for its overwhelming presence here, becoming an active partner with the city for the benefit of all.

*I wish* we would become less reliant on cars. Slimming down Forster and State streets and putting in bike lanes and bump-outs would be a great start.

*I wish* that people with means—money, time, whatever resource you have in abundance—would make a greater commitment to helping their community.

I also wish for such things as less poverty, crime and racism, but that applies throughout our entire society, challenges certainly not unique to the Harrisburg area.

I suppose that all of these fall under the umbrella of being nicer to one another—kinder, more patient, more understanding, more giving, less willing to jump to conclusions, expect ill intent or demonize one another.

I do have one solid idea that goes beyond just a wish.

Last month, I wrote a blog post in which I implored people—those who can—to dedicate half of their federal stimulus checks to local businesses and organizations. So, I would like to repeat that suggestion here.

Of course, I realize that many people need every cent to pay their rent or purchase food and other essentials. But, if you’re fortunate enough to have resources to spare, please don’t lock them all away—spread them around to others.

Do you have a favorite restaurant, shop, sandwich joint, nonprofit or arts group? Spend it there: donate, buy a gift card, tip generously, make a purchase. These pillars of our community need our help now, and we desperately need them to remain here with and for us.

One day, this crisis will be over. Countering Henley’s lyrics, the streets won’t be empty, nor will the lake. People will gather again to watch the sun go down over the Susquehanna. And then someone will say, “Hey, let’s meet up for a burger and a beer,” and perhaps we’ll think for a moment about how lucky we are to be doing something so simple. **B**

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