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News

Building One Pa. summit draws huge crowd (video)

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LANCASTER — The core issues raised when the First Suburbs advocacy group visited Upper Darby, Norristown and Pottstown in recent months were on full display Friday when the Building One Pennsylvania summit meeting convened. Held at Thaddeus Stevens Technical College and attended by more than 600 people representing more than 350 organizations, the event was both a rally and workshop; revival and review.

Speakers ranged from David Troutt, a professor of law and justice at Rutgers University to Myron Orfield, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution to Jean Dexheimer, a school board member in the Wilkinsburg School District whose description of the challenges her board faces could have been mirrored by a half a dozen urban school boards in Southeast Pennsylvania.

"We are a powerful organization, but we need to become more powerful," Jacquelynn Puriefey-Brinkley of Yeadon Borough Council and the co-chair of the Southeastern Pennsylvania First Suburbs Project told the crowd.

"We need your power too in order to influence state and federal government policies that benefit our communities," she said. "We have come together today to begin the work of building a powerful coalition dedicated to the creation of a statewide agenda that recognizes, respects and addresses the need to revitalize Pennsylvania's valuable older communities."

It is an agenda that's needed to preserve the cities and towns that built America, and thereby preserving the open spaces into which growth is now headed, said Allentown Mayor Ed Pawlowski, who said his city, the commonwealth's third largest, "faces challenges like every other urban area. We have state-fed mandates that cripple our progress."

That, Pawlowski warned, coupled with "the lack of an ability to make any change because of business as usual in Harrisburg and Washington" will ultimately mean that "every municipality in the state will fall like dominoes."

The status quo is unsustainable, he said, quoting Dwight D. Eisenhower, who said "the history of free men is never really written by chance but by choice; their choice!"

Added Pawlowski, "Doing nothing is hard to do because you don't know when you're finished. Enough is enough," Pawlowski said, "it's time to stop doing nothing."

Part of the problem, according to Troutt, is that the "stifling economic stress" local governments now struggle with in Pennsylvania are tooted "in the assumptions that lay at the heart of the suburban mythology and in how their strengths often mask their weaknesses."

The "three assumptions" he cited are that "being middle class means self-sufficiency;" that the benefits of suburban living "housing values, low crime, depends mainly on the distance from the poor;" and that "segregation no longer exists and what does is voluntary."

"All of these assumptions are flawed," Troutt.

Leaving cities and towns for the suburbs "was a hard sell at first," said Troutt, because of the costs of land development and the problem of transit, until automobiles became common after World War I and the federal government, in its first hidden subsidy, kindly build an interstate highway system that made living in the suburbs affordable.

Further, the tradition of "local control" in local schools and municipal governments "is at its best, creating the conditions for true democracy" but also allowed for exclusive policies to be developed which kept people from living near their work places, Troutt said.

After Supreme Court decisions in the 1970s supported "local control" on issues of segregation, "white flight" began from cities, resulting in "political fragmentation."

With each town behind a "wall" and each local government "desperately seeking a tax base you will, by definition, have winners and losers," said Troutt, as well as create "large, often contiguous islands of undesirable space."

It is, he said "a system that produces areas of concentrated wealth and concentrated poverty and a good deal of stress in between."

In reality, Pennsylvanians and Americans "live in regions and when a neighboring municipality declines, it affects us all. We need to spread the burdens and the benefits more equitably."

"We will not assure economic stability by building one more shopping mall; one more office park or one less multi-family apartment. The jig is up," said Troutt. "We are running out of land and natural resources to run to and use up. We can't do it alone, but by choosing to change, we can do it together."

Orfield, who has studied these issues closely at Brookings, agreed. "We live in regions. We live in housing markets, in employment markets and regions are a necessary unit to compete in a global economy."

"And Pennsylvania has hundreds of places that fight amongst themselves rather than compete together in a global economy, and rather than spending wisely on re-building and re-tooling our existing communities, we build new ones, which gives us rapid land development with limited population growth," said Orfield.

"Because we're not working together, we have these unmanageable burdens and the older boroughs, places like Pottstown and places throughout Delaware and Chester counties, become more isolated. These are big consequences. These are reasons to act," Orfield said.

Organizers for the event invited both candidates for governor, Republican Tom Corbett and Democrat Dan Onorato, to address the forum, but only Onorato accepted the invitation.

He said his experience as Allegheny County Executive has helped him to understand the issues facing what he calls the "first ring suburbs."

"They have assets you can't take away. They have proximity to urban areas, they are often along existing rail

lines and what we need to do is be smart with the limited public dollars we have, and target where we want to use that money, where we'll get the biggest bang for the buck," Onorato said.

And that bang comes with "recognizing what we already have and taking care of what we already have before we start building anything else. It's a lot cheaper to take care of the infrastructure we already have."

He also agreed with comments about political fragmentation, noting that "we have more than 2,500 municipalities in the state and that's just too much."

Amy Francis, who was at the event representing Pottstown's Code Blue, said she found it helpful.

"There were a lot of things discussed today that are very relevant," she said. Chief among them? "Regionalizing our plans and getting organized because I think we've been a little dysfunctional recently, maybe."

Tom Carroll, a member of the Pottstown Borough Authority, was at the meeting representing Preservation Pottstown and he said "what we learned here today is amazing — that we all have to work together."

However that's not possible, said Carroll, when the leaders who make those decisions are not present.

"Our leaders need to be at these summit meetings, where are our leaders today?" Carroll asked at the end of the event. "We need our council members here, we need our Main Street Manager here, we need the people who make the policy, we need them here to join this group."

Two of those local policy makers, Pottstown Schools Superintendent Reed Lindley and Pottstown School Board member Thomas Hylton, were at the meeting.

Lindley said he was concerned about how much of the meeting was devoted to "honoring the problem, worshipping the problem" and how much was not devoted to discussing possible solutions.

He said he did like comments Onorato made about the targeted use of limited public dollars "where they will make a difference."

Some of the suggestions commonly made to address the matter, Lindley said, "are really band aids addressing the symptoms. Jobs are what will help both the local economy and allow people to climb the economic ladder."

"The key to this" Lindley said, "will be looking at any solution proposed and asking the question, will it bring people together or divide them?"

He and Hylton both said they were particularly taken by the comments of Jean Dexheimer, the school board member from Wilkesburg, a "first ring suburb" of Pittsburgh.

With a school district ranked 498th out of Pennsylvania's 500 school districts, Wilkesburg "was once the place to be," Dexheimer told the audience. "People paid tuition to send their children there, or used a false address to send them there."

Now, more than 50 percent of the district's children are in single-parent homes and the middle class "which can't afford to leave" is sending their children to charter schools, which cost the district even more money.

The town is caught, she said, in a catch-22. "We won't raise the property taxes because more people will

leave, but we can't revitalize without reforming the schools and no school reform will work so long as communities like ours are allowed to decline."

Tomorrow: No Town Left Behind will look at housing issues.

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