

East Allentown - Rittersville Neighborhood Association Presentation before a hearing of a Department of Public Welfare Committee on the Closing of the Allentown State Hospital --- Monday, February 22, 2010 at 3:45 PM by EARN President Dennis L. Pearson

The East Allentown- Rittersville Neighborhood Association comprises the 14th and 15th wards of the City of Allentown --- that portion of the city located east and north of the Lehigh River, which includes the location of the Allentown State Hospital.

It remains the expressed wish and hope of the association that the Allentown State Hospital remains operational. Unfortunately, this closure seems like a slow death to us for it evolved incrementally since the 1980's. . Nevertheless, we cling to the slight hope that the Allentown State Hospital would be rescued from closure even in the face of the DPW's recent announcement of the same on or by December 31, 2010(which we are told caught all our Assembly and Senate representatives by surprise who serve our divided district neighborhood).... But if this hope is dashed , it is our firm belief that the future use of this site must balance the needs of the City of Allentown with the impact on the neighborhoods immediately adjacent.

We are not unmindful of the fact that the development of a tract of this size --- a huge piece of land that goes from Hanover Avenue all the way back to the Lehigh River --- is expected by some to provide a significant addition to the tax base of the city. The City of Allentown Financial Recovery Plan of 7/25/2009 speculated that in Fiscal Year 2009 the sale of an undefined acreage of Allentown State Hospital land would yield a projected sale price of \$180,000 with a future projected property tax of \$150,000 yearly. In spite of these rather optimistic projections which we note have not yet materialized we do have misgiving.

It is our belief that the increased infrastructure costs will eat up a significant portion of any increased tax revenue - perhaps all of it. Examples of these infrastructure costs may be construction for new roads, water and sewer lines - whether for sanitary runoff or sewage effluent discharges , pumping systems to ensure adequate water pressure for fire protection, water tower storage and delivery and other uses, as well as projects to remove asbestos and other Brownfield materials that may exist on the tract. Last of all, the important need to provide police, fire and medical emergency services.

We propose this challenge to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Lehigh County, the Allentown School District and the City of Allentown... And yes, even the Federal Government. Any future development must minimize any negative impacts on east Allentown, with particular reference to environmental impact, infrastructure costs, traffic congestion, increased criminal activity, and possible crowding in area public schools.

To aid in the closure process, the DWP said it would establish a strong community advisory team made up of Allentown residents, county representatives from the Allentown service

area, as well as other interested stakeholders who will monitor and assist the department through the process.

EARN as a stakeholder, and the neighborhood most impacted by any present and future decision this advisory team may make to the DWP and to the State Assembly, fully understands that members of our association and our community ought to be represented on this advisory team when hearings, meetings and discussions are held related to closure and reuse of all the grounds related to the institution. The question may be raised: "Why is this so necessary?" It is necessary because our long-term residents have the personal knowledge of where the former swamp, dumping of road material, asphalt, sludge pitch material, field drainage systems, etc. can be found.

A little known fact that most people don't understand about the Allentown State Hospital is that it mainly sits on marsh land. We ask: Do we do right if we allow developers to destroy yet another wetlands area, especially one which clearly supplements the across the River Wildlands Conservancy property on South Mountain, throughout all of which are deer and other wildlife that roam on both sides of the river.

Oddly the abundance of wildlife in the vicinity of Allentown State Hospital and the adjacent Community of East Allentown residents living on the Hill has become more noticeable since the construction of the well traveled Route 78 just South of South Mountain. Since then this wildlife because of the loss of habitat has migrated to this area. And we do recommend that as part of the planning process, an impact study on wildlife existing there be made.

As indicated before, we know that City Administrators have considered both the State Hospital and Queen City Airport as the best "solutions" to increasing the Allentown tax base. And as a counter-point there are those who think that both tracts should remain undeveloped. Their belief is that our officials should raise the tide by improving the quality of life..

But for East Siders, the descending northern slope of Lehigh Mountain away from the river has been totally encroached upon by a combination of existing development and new City of Allentown approved high density development ... And this new development even has spilled over the crest of the Mountain toward the southern descending side which slopes toward both the Norfolk-Southern Railroad tracks and Lehigh River at the bottom. Quite literally, the open space as seen on Allentown State Hospital grounds can be described as an Oasis surrounded by an encroaching and windblown desert with the water tower looking very much as a golf ball on a tee serving as sentinel.

We understand that various state properties including other state hospitals have been turned into so-called mixed use developments which include both housing and other types of buildings.

But do we really need more apartments and high density homes? With tens of thousands of people here already, this part of town is congested enough! With only 2 main east/west arteries flowing through it all and the site sitting on Hanover Ave, which is already maxed daily in traffic volume, do we want to exacerbate the problem? ... We don't think so, and we hope regional planners agree ... We note, at present the Allentown State Hospital property can only be accessed from Hanover Avenue into a beautiful tree-lined cul-de-sac road leading up to main Hospital building. Other access roads from Sherman Street to River Road and from E. Hamilton Street have been closed years ago.

Although the City of Allentown did encourage the State to cede part of the land for development. We do not blame the City for the State's decision to pull the plug . This was Ed Rendell and our state government at work. But as one voicer in the Morning Call observed: "With that being said, consolidation wouldn't be such a bad idea, but the problem is... who loses? Norristown gets all of Philly's people, plus some from the suburbs. Allentown is the split between Norristown and Clark-Summit. Wernersville would be the logical one to go. Open up previously closed units in Norristown and Allentown, and move the staff (if they're willing to commute) over. "

In my lifetime, I have seen the decline of many industries in the Lehigh Valley area since the 60's. The most notable that impacted strongly on my neighborhood was the closure of Bethlehem Steel, Lehigh Structural Steel, Arbogast and Bastian Meat Packer, Neuweiler and Horlacher Breweries, the relocation of manufacturing facilities by Agere Technology one of many the successors to Western Electric, and Mack Trucks.

Equally so, as a neighborhood we have dealt with the downturn of operations at the Allentown State Hospital as well. In the 80's, all the buildings were in use. Then, in the 90's they transferred some of the more elderly patients out to facilities that were more equipped to take care of their needs and proceeded to close those units. Now most of the buildings are contracted out to other agencies not related to the state At one time, cars coming into and going out of the cul-de-sac road at Hanover Avenue at shift change presented a problem for the School Crossing Guard at Plymouth Street. Then it was not a matter of speeding cars or people ignoring School Crossing Guard attempts to get School Children from Ritter Elementary across the road safely, it was the matter of the volume of cars coming out of the cul-de-sac and finding the right opportunity to stop all traffic to allow the children to cross the street. Then with decline in operations and decline in vehicular traffic to and from the Hospital, the traffic pattern on Hanover Avenue changed but was not as safe. As stated above , periodically, the Hospital contracted out its closed building for other uses. But what shocked the neighborhood was the sale of Allentown State Hospital Land to build Transitional Housing on E. Gordon and N. Oswego Streets for former Allentown State Hospital residents deemed

healthy enough to live out in the community but under supervision of professionals who visited the apartments on a regular defined basis. This was an early sign that things were changing at the Hospital.

Now we observe that an individual who had worked only four short years at the State Hospital, claims that he or she has seen many of the same people who were deemed well enough to go out to group homes come back for a second, third time. And moreover, there are patients there that doctors have acknowledged will never fare well in a community setting.

The neighborhood is saddened at what will happen to these patients and what will happen to those still employed at the Allentown State HospitalKnowing that the final word may have been said about Allentown State Hospital closure ... We turn our focus to its reuse. Not that we want to. But from the sense of reality.

In conclusion, we say that our neighbors are telling us the following about what development or lack of development should happen on the grounds of the former Allentown Homeopathic Hospital for the Insane which opened nearly a century ago on Oct. 3, 1912 in the village of Rittersville which actually extended from Pennsylvania Avenue in Bethlehem to Irving Street in Allentown.

1. We note -- traditionally East Allentown has been the most family oriented section of the City by statistics. Therefore we are very much interested in promoting families with kids to move here and promoting activities for the same ... Nevertheless - the neighborhood objects to the development of apartments and multi-family housing on the Allentown State Hospital property ... Such housing would exacerbate traffic conditions on Hanover Avenue and could put added pressure on the Allentown School System..
2. Most of this land should remain undeveloped or remain open space leaving open habitat for wildlife with reuse or new development occurring only within the footprint of the Allentown State Hospital's current buildings
3. The tree lined entrance to the Allentown State Hospital Campus, the historic main building and the water tower should be preserved.
4. It would be totally acceptable that the current buildings and campus to be used for a Veteran's Administration Hospital.
5. It would be totally acceptable that the current buildings and campus to be used for a developing a stand-alone Medical/Pharmacy school in the Lehigh Valley. The Lehigh Valley doesn't have a standalone Med or Pharmacy school in our area (St. Luke's Bethlehem Med School is in affiliation with a Temple med school). Even Erie, PA has both a Medical and Pharmacy school. The Scranton/W-B area is developing a medical school and already has a pharmacy school at Wilkes Univ. in W-B. We could also use a

physical therapy program and PhD programs in the biomedical sciences. How about a Lehigh/Moravian/Muhlenberg College of Medicine, Pharmacy and Biomedical Sciences? We all know we will need more doctors and healthcare workers in the coming years.

6. It would be totally acceptable that the current footprint of the Allentown State Hospital be utilized by the Allentown School District or some private school to meet its school building needs .

7. A certain portion of the footprint be used for Athletic fields for East Side A-Youth Youth Organizations..

8. We do not close our mind to the development of a business park with medical offices in the footprint of the State Hospital Campus But such a Business Park must aesthetically fit into the neighborhood and what surrounds it. We do not want the type of businesses and type of construction we term Business slums located North and South of Union Boulevard nearby the former Agere Technology plant. The Agere Technology Plant we add should be retooled for new manufacturing rather than introduce manufacturing that would not aesthetically fit into the neighborhood and what surrounds it and would in fact become an intrusive nuisance.

9. For security reasons, some developments are termed gated communities ... For the reason that we may not have access to the new residents of these communities and the fact that these developments may use up more of the open land than we desire we are not thrilled by such developments ... On a limited basis within the footprint over 55 communities are acceptable.

10. Finally, if new housing is built on the Allentown State Hospital Campus it should be single family detached housing ... Ideally the portion of the property allowed for such housing should allow one house per acre. However, as much as three houses could be built on a acre if on that tract three other acres are not built upon where building is allowed.

Clearly, the City of Allentown will play an important role in the future development of a comprehensive Land Use plan for the 217 acres that currently comprise the Allentown State Hospital Campus and will facilitate this plan with newly adopted Planning and Zoning Ordinances for the area... As predicted by Lehigh County Executive Don Cunningham: " Coming up with a plan that everyone agrees on could be difficult ... Both because of competing interests among elected officials and developers, and the desire of people who live around the Hospital." ... So in the end, when things are finalized in time after give and take , all governmental units and the public should be on the same page if that is possible... And the State should not abandon its responsibility in the process by passing the torch too quickly before such same page agreement is achieved. It is a priority, indeed that we find a way to turn something negative into something positive.

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Exhibit 1 ...14th Ward - Blue 15th Ward - Green

EARN also comprises part of the 131st PA State Assembly District, represented by Republican Karen Beyer, the 133rd, represented by Democrat Joe Brennan; and the 135th, represented by Democrat Steve Samuelson as well as part of the 16th State Senatorial District, represented by Republican, Pat Browne. Not that it means anything, except for Senator Browne none of these individuals live in Allentown ... Ironically, Democrat Jennifer Mann of the 132nd District and who lives in Allentown represents Allentown's 1st Ward just across the Lehigh River. However, her district does not include either the 14th and 15th wards of Allentown also known as East Allentown.



Exhibit 2 --- 131st District - Orange --- 133rd District - Green 135th District --- Red